

THE GOINGS
GOOD WITH
GOODCHILD

MOUNTAIN GOLD

GEORGE
GOODCHILD

A
HODDER & STOUGHTON

H&S
YELLOW JACKET

MOUNTAIN GOLD



*They found it-
but they never came home*

GEORGE GOODCHILD

**MOUNTAIN
GOLD**

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GOODCHILD**

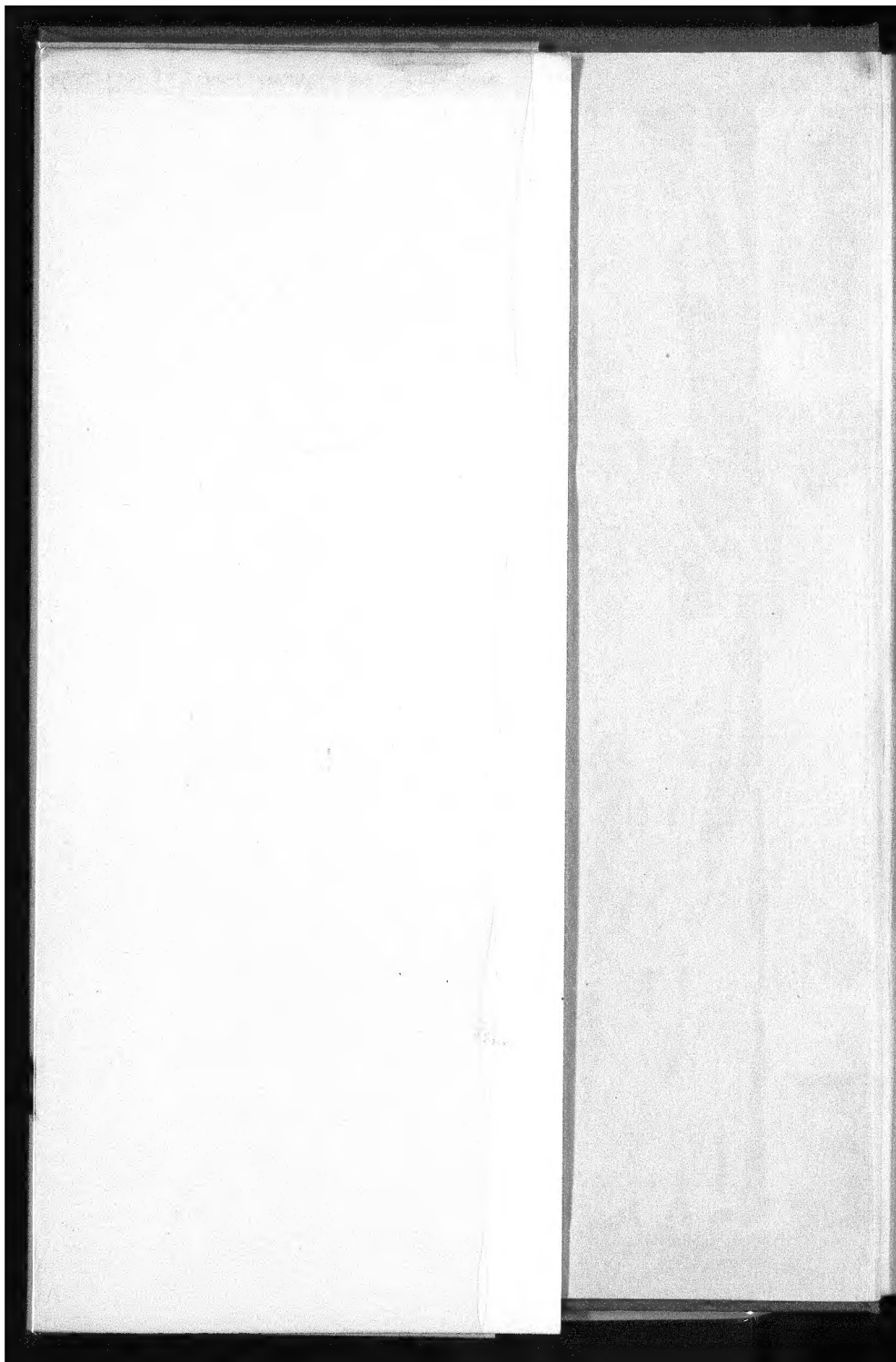


**HODDER AND
STOUGHTON**

**MOUNTAIN
GOLD**



**GEORGE
GOODCHILD**



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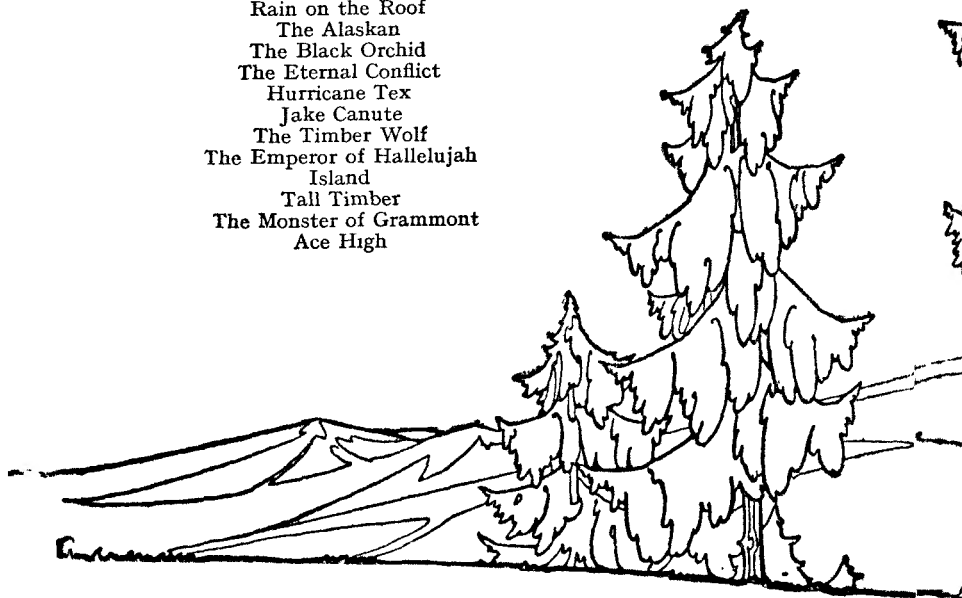
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MOUNTAIN GOLD

NOVELS BY
GEORGE GOODCHILD



Mountain Gold
For Reasons Unknown
The Triumph of McLean
Chief Inspector McLean
McLean at the Golden Owl
McLean of Scotland Yard
Jack O'Lantern
McLean Investigates
How Now, McLean?
The Freeze-Out
The Road to Marrakesh
The Splendid Crime
Jim Goes North
Rain on the Roof
The Alaskan
The Black Orchid
The Eternal Conflict
Hurricane Tex
Jake Canute
The Timber Wolf
The Emperor of Hallelujah
Island
Tall Timber
The Monster of Grammont
Ace High

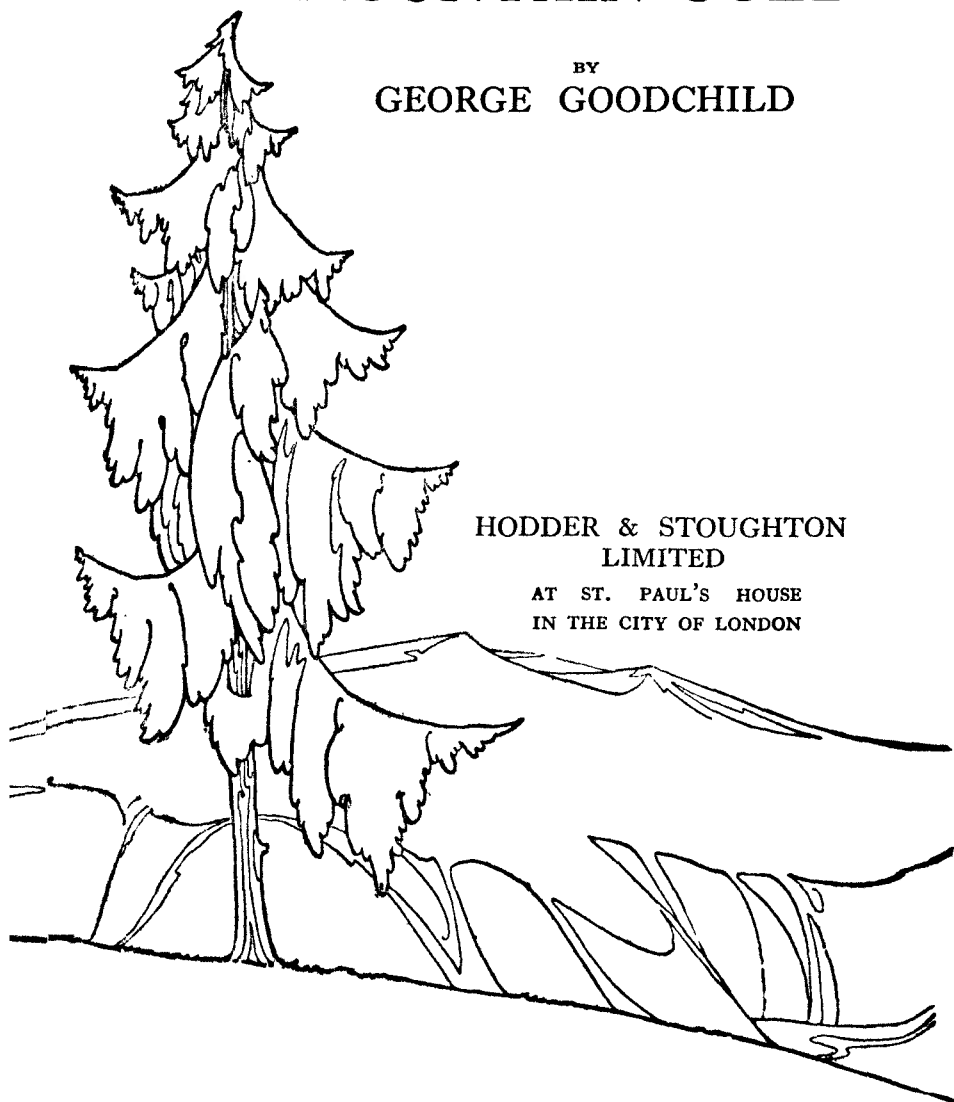


MOUNTAIN GOLD

BY
GEORGE GOODCHILD

HODDER & STOUGHTON
LIMITED

AT ST. PAUL'S HOUSE
IN THE CITY OF LONDON



*The characters in this Book are
entirely imaginary and have no
relation to any living person*

First published in Great Britain in 1933

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THE airplane emerged from the curling edge of the cumulus cloud mass, through which the pilot had been flying "blind" for some time, and dropped at a steep angle to the lower altitudes, into a sea of amber sunlight shed by a declining sun. Below was a panorama of tumbling foothills, intersected by dense patches of timber, and a silver serpentine river whose source lay somewhere amid the distant mountains. But a few links of the twisting river were visible—the rest lay hidden in the folded earth.

Eastward the valley flattened out into prairie land, which extended as far as vision could reach, and on most of which the wheat crop had been harvested. The solitary flier found a level keel at about three thousand feet, and stared directly ahead. Straddling the river some sixteen miles eastward was St. Pierre, which had but recently emerged from a conglomeration of timbered dwellings. It now boasted two factories, a hydro-electric plant, a hospital, and two thoroughfares which might by a pardonable stretch of the imagination be called "streets."

Between it and the airplane were a few scattered farms, none of which was on a large scale. The pilot identified them as her roving gaze took them in, and finally concentrated on the white blob near the conical pine-topped hill on the southern side of the river. This was "Winthorpe," the place she called home. The

steady drone of the engine increased in intensity as she gave it full throttle and killed the intervening space.

It was eight miles to Winthorpe, and it took exactly six minutes to cover it. Instead of making a landing at once the flier circled above the farm, for the sheer joy of taking in yet again the familiar scene. The white twisting ribbon that ran between the burned stubble was the rough track that led to St. Pierre—now a dust-heap, but in the fall a veritable quagmire. Hell and all its tortures had not been cursed with greater fluency than that seven miles of prairie road.

As she gazed down a dense cloud of dust, moving towards the farm, indicated that some one was being slowly suffocated. She came down at a steep angle, banked frightfully at the pine patch, roared over the head of the driver, and then zoomed up again, to the accompaniment of some very terse masculine remarks. Half a mile farther on she "pancaked" cleverly on the sun-baked earth, and came to rest.

She stepped out of the machine and removed the flying-helmet. The cloud of dust was still approaching, but becoming less dense as the car reached the slightly better road in the neighbourhood of the farm. Finally it subsided altogether and revealed a very dilapidated car, which was being driven by a bronze-faced man of about thirty-five. He drove the car to within a few yards of the stationary airplane, and then got out and regarded the late pilot, who was busy

banging her half-frozen hands on her corduroy breeches.

"Helen!"

"Here, O brother."

"So that's what you call flying?"

"What would you call it, Alan?"

"Monkeying."

"Well, what's in a word. A rose by any other name——".

"But, seriously, you shouldn't do it. You came miles too near that hill—and me."

"Oh, she behaves beautifully! I believe I could take the pipe out of your mouth."

He looked her up and down, and could not conceal a smile of admiration. She was not yet twenty-one, but looked a little more, for the prairie sun and wind had accelerated maturity. The cheeks were full, and dimpled when she smiled, and the eyes a deep hazel and full of fun and health. But her whole facial make-up was not that of an irresponsible girl. In some subtle way she gave the impression of seriousness, as did the man who was now reprimanding her.

Between her and her brother there had been another boy, who had gone to France in the early days of the Great War, and had never come back to the land which he loved. She could only recall him in a vague way, and his name was seldom mentioned now, for the War was not a favourite topic with the Mandisons.

"Who told you you could use 'Nimrod'?" demanded Alan.

"Nobody told me I couldn't."

" You'll break your blessed neck one of these days, and then——"

" Then you'll have no one to bully and abuse. How's the flivver behaving ? "

Alan turned and looked at the steaming worn-out car.

" Like a cow with a cough," he said. " She's awful—firing on about two, and then very sulkily. If we don't get a new auto soon we shall have to walk into town."

" Why not fly ? "

" Father would rather crawl on his hands and knees. But what have you been up to ? "

" ' Up to ' is the correct expression. I have been altituding. I made twenty-two thousand."

" What ! "

" Twenty-two thousand—and more. Why that look of incredulity ? "

" It can't be done."

" Not with you at the joy-stick. But I've put up a new record for you to beat. Gee, it was cold up there ! "

" Guess you must have read the altimeter upside down."

" No, I was right-side up all the time. Alan, have I ever lied to you ? "

" Not often."

" Have I ever exaggerated ? "

" Not when you could avoid it."

She sprang at him and rumbled his hair.

" Oh, you brute ! "

" Steady ! " he protested.

" What's the best news from St. Pierre ? "

"There isn't any. Folks are as glum as a cage full of thrushes. Gorman thinks the world is coming to an end. Old Martin is quite sure that everybody will be broke this time next year."

"He ought to talk," she protested. "Why, he's worth about half a million."

"Of course. He's the sort of fellow who makes depressions. Why, he is a depression himself. Still, there is a distinct atmosphere of despondency. I'm darned glad to get back here again."

"Father is nearly as bad," she said. "That is why he won't consider buying a new auto."

"I'll talk to him. If everybody stops buying everything a nice state of things will ensue. I've taken the risk of incurring Pop's displeasure by bringing home a carload of things that we really need. There'll be fireworks. To-morrow I shall have to go to Calgary."

"In the flivver?"

"Sure!"

"I wish you joy."

"I intend tickling up her carburettor and fitting a new set of spark-plugs to-night. Coming indoors?"

"Yes. I'll see Hank later about putting 'Nimrod' into her stable."

They entered the house and Helen changed into feminine attire. Her brother had been an air-pilot in the War, and the Gipsy Moth really belonged to him, but she borrowed it on occasion, with or without his permission. She had been coached by him during the last year, and for the past few months had been venturing alone into

the blue. Alan now had no fears about her, for she was possessed of steady nerves, initiative, and courage.

Brought up in the company of men, Helen had little of the "soft" female about her. Young as she was, she had seen their holding reach out, ever to claim more and more land from the jealous and resisting "wild." Modern machinery had been brought in to aid man in his grim battle against Nature. There had been good years, bad years, lean years, and for months before the harvesting men had talked and gambled on the probable crop. At times their most experienced speculations had been shattered rudely by some totally unexpected and unscheduled catastrophe, and they had seen the fruits of unremitting labour laid waste.

So into her mind had come the realisation that life was a kind of endless battle, with each season a new skirmish in the affray. It did not knock romance completely out of her life, but it gave her a fine sense of balance, and she learned early that only effort, patience, the will to carry on despite temporary set-backs, made for serenity of mind.

A year or two before she had come back from school, with a feeling of great relief. There she had mingled with girls whose outlook on life was very different—girls who had never seen the hungry "cultivator" tearing up the soil that men might eat in far distant lands—girls who talked men, cinemas, and claptrap from dawn till dusk—girls whose early life had been spent in the ever-growing cities, and whose future lay

there. Naturally there were others in her own class, but they were in a minority, and she believed it to be an increasing minority, for the tempo of modern life was making demands that the prairie was incapable of supplying.

She had asked herself many times was she as "hard-baked" as their familiar sobriquet made out. Some one had called her "Hard-baked Helen" years before, and the nickname stuck until the day when she took the train westward and watched from the window the big stone-built school fading away.

At heart she knew that the nickname was undeserved. In her somewhat reserved nature was a rich seam of ready sympathy, a love for the simple things of life, and a burning desire to be true to herself—though she had to admit that that SELF was a very illusive personage. Once back home the spick-and-span schoolgirl was very quickly transformed into the semi-masculine. The men about the farm still swore as savagely as they ever did when she was too young to be critical. The old battle was still in progress, and she took sides with the swearers against opposing "powers that were."

Between herself and her "big brother" there was perfect and complete understanding—even more than there was between her and her father. Alan made no mistake about her. In his quiet, unassuming way he was an excellent psychologist. That men could get nothing out of Helen was not Helen's fault: the fault lay with Fate in not sending along the right man.

"Skirts again," he said, when she came downstairs. "Well, I think I like 'em better."

"That shows you suffer from the prevailing malady—convention, with a capital C."

"It doesn't. It proves I once took a course in art. Breeches are all right from the point of view of utility—but it ends there where a girl is concerned. There's something to be said for the evolution of dress."

"Alan, you've missed your vocation," she retorted. "You shouldn't be a farmer."

"What would you suggest?"

"I'll think it over and tell you later. Where's father?"

"In his room. He'll be down in a few minutes. It's the old trouble—malaria. Can't think what made him go shooting Turks in Mesopotamia when he would have been a darned sight more use growing corn here."

"What made you go up in the air shooting down Germans when you might have been collecting eggs? Alan, you aren't strong on logic. Tea!"

"Thanks. Oh, I ran into Stimson in town. It's possible he may blow over this evening."

"With what object?"

"Ask yourself."

She curled her lip, knowing perfectly well what was at the back of his remark. Wilbur Stimson's father had started the only automobile business in town some fifteen years before, and with a virtual monopoly, plus a keen American business acumen, had done exceedingly well for himself.

By the time Wilbur was old enough to enter the business his job was a sinecure. In charge of the sales department, Wilbur spent most of his time taking out prospective clients in comfortable cars of the luxurious order, leaving his underlings to demonstrate the "rough stuff."

"I imagine the dance-hall must be burnt down," she said.

"Oh, have a heart, sister!"

Wilbur eventually rolled up in the best car that the showrooms contained. He himself was like the car—very immaculate and highly polished. Alan was engaged in writing up some books when he arrived and old Mandison was reading a depressing account of the wheat slump.

"Hullo, Wilbur!" said Mandison. "Is this business or otherwise?"

"Otherwise. I wouldn't waste time trying to sell you an automobile like that—until you have a road fit to drive it on. There's half a mile of it that you could lose a steam roller in. Howdo Alan!"

"Cheerio! Can't talk now. Give me a quarter of an hour. Helen is putting the plane away."

Wilbur nodded and strolled out towards the big wooden hangar. He came upon Helen closing the door, and clapped his hands over her eyes from behind.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"The only man in Alberta who has a voice like an infant in dire distress," she retorted.

"Are you aware I am trying to lock this door?"

He took his hands away from her eyes, and

frowned a little. To him Helen was a complete enigma. He had long told himself that he represented a most excellent "chance" for her. The business was growing, and it was a good business, not subject to the terrible slumps that were overtaking the farmers. With most women he got on extremely well, because he flattered himself he knew how to handle them. But all his blandishments seemed completely lost on Helen. Compliments, cheap wit, facetious conversation, all failed. She seemed to be strangely dead from the heart upwards.

"I thought you might feel like taking a spin," he said. "I've brought a Rolls."

"I should be more at home in a Ford—pre-War model preferred," she said.

"You can't expect me really to believe that?"

"Why not?"

"It's human nature to like the best. But will you come?"

She hesitated for a moment. Her first impulse was to raise an excuse, because she knew how quick Wilbur was to receive encouragement—and to draw totally unwarranted conclusions. But she ultimately consented, with an ulterior motive in her mind. For his sake and for hers it were better to get down to reality, and the motor-ride might present opportunities for so doing.

"Fine!" he said. "Will you get a coat, while I remove some of your prairie dust from the cushions."

Ten minutes later they were off. For some

miles they bumped along the atrocious road, and then made a turn into a better finished highway. Here the fine car behaved like the thoroughbred it was. Wilbur started to eulogise. He was thinking of buying the car for himself. He was now a director in the firm, and as such it was incumbent upon him to go in for something really good. From that he wandered through well-rehearsed by-ways until he was talking on much more intimate lines.

"There'll come a time when I'll have to handle the business," he said. "Pop's thinking of retiring—going farther west, to California. I've got a married sister there, you know. It's time I settled down, but a fellow needs a real anchorage—apart from business. You know what I mean?"

Helen did, but she said nothing until, emboldened, he stopped the car and seized one of her hands.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I'm glad I came with you, Wilbur."

"So am I——"

"Please let me continue. I'm perfectly happy as I am, and I see all I ever want to see of the male sex. When I want to buy a ticket in a lottery I'll take one in the Irish Sweep, where I can cut my losses easily. Backing your chances with a few dollars is one thing, backing them with your life is another. Oh, no, Wilbur. Turn the car here and let us get back."

"You mean you don't care for me—at all?"

"You shouldn't put embarrassing questions.

Is the alternative to caring—disliking? I don't dislike you. I can't think of any man I really dislike. For six months you have been trying to tell me you love me, and for six months I have been trying to tell you that you are wasting your time. That's all there is to it, Wilbur. I don't love anybody—that way—and never shall."

"But you're human!"

"I hope so."

"And yet content to go on living out here, and missing real life?"

She laughed amusedly at this.

"You can be unconsciously funny, Wilbur," she added. "Life can't be 'missed.' It encloses you, interpenetrates you, whether you like it or not. You think a girl can have no life without a man hanging round her. I think she can. At any rate I've never yet met a man who has convinced me that he is absolutely necessary to my happiness."

"You may yet," he replied, rather spitefully.

"I can't imagine him," she said. "At any rate he would have to be—very different."

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER II

EARLY the following morning Helen saw Alan off to Calgary. The car had been provided with the new set of spark-plugs, and a decided improvement was immediately noticeable. But for that Alan would have gone by

airplane, but he had a quantity of gear to bring back with him, and for this purpose the car was more suited.

"Back in two days, provided the engine doesn't drop out," he said. "Cheerio!"

"Good journey!"

It was late in the afternoon when an unexpected visitor arrived. Helen recognised him as Dunton, a well-known citizen of St. Pierre, and chairman of the local hospital, which had been built chiefly with money supplied by him.

"Is your father about?" he asked.

"Yes. He hasn't been very well, but he is much better to-day."

"I'm glad of that. And Alan?"

"He has gone to Calgary."

"Will he be home later?"

"Oh, no. He can't possibly get back until late to-morrow night."

Dunton appeared to be very disappointed at hearing this. Mandison suddenly appeared on the veranda, and waved an inviting arm to his old friend.

"You look all hot and bothered," he said as Dunton shook hands. "Anything wrong?"

"I was hoping to find Alan at home. We've had a kind of S O S from Redhills."

"Who is Redhills?"

"It isn't a person—it's a place. Half Indian population, with some French. It came from a doctor—Dupree—you may remember him. A runner got it as far as the telegraph station at Quintock, and from there it came to us. There's

a bad outbreak of smallpox, and Dupree wants vaccine. If we can't send a supply we're to get through to Calgary. Of course that will mean delay, and I was hoping we could do this job ourselves. You see, it would be a sort of feather in our cap. But if Alan is away——"

"He can't get back until to-morrow night. I suppose this is urgent?"

"Yes. Dupree says his only chance of checking it is vaccine. Luckily we had a fair supply of that, but transport's the trouble. Only an airplane can get there in time."

Helen emerged from the house to hear the last remark. She saw Dunton shrug his shoulders disappointedly, and judged that something was amiss.

"If it's an airplane you want, we have it," she said.

"It isn't only an airplane—it's a pilot."

"Well, what is the matter with me? Do you want a message delivered anywhere?"

"It's a matter of life and death," said Dunton. "There's smallpox broken out at a place called Redhills. A French doctor has got a message through. But the country is difficult, and there's only one possible landing-place. Our instructions were to tell the pilot to look for smoke in daylight, fire at night."

"I'll get a map," she said, and went into the house.

Dunton looked at Mandison.

"She surely doesn't intend——?"

"If Helen makes up her mind wild horses

won't stop her," replied Mandison. "And I'm not sure that I ought to try. Alan considers her a capable pilot——"

Helen reappeared with a large-scale map in her hand. She laid it on the table and Dunton indicated the position of the distressed village. It was over three hundred miles to the north-west, in the most desolate part of the country. For sixty miles the small river could be used as a guide, but after that it was broken country all the way, with forests and canyons intervening.

"Due west from where the river bends," mused Helen. "It ought to be fairly easy going. Have you brought that vaccine with you?"

"Yes; but are you sure it isn't running a great risk——?"

"Not half the risk that is being run by those poor people at Redhills. I'll go and change. Give me ten minutes."

She was down again within the time mentioned, clad in breeches, short leather coat, and flying-helmet. In the meantime Dunton had brought the phials of vaccine from his car. She took the little package.

"Say five hours each way, and half an hour there," she said. "I ought to be back by dusk. Look after yourself, father!"

"You look after *yourself*," he replied. "I don't like it much, Helen, but then——"

"Oh, rubbish! The plane is in excellent condition. Alan will be green with envy."

The plane took off a few minutes later. It made altitude quickly, and for the first half-hour

Helen was over country which she knew fairly well, but at the bend in the narrow, serpentine river she had to take new bearings, and from there her course lay over absolutely unknown territory. She set the nose of the plane due west, and was soon flying over the most broken country imaginable. Most of it was thick timber, but here and there she could see great chasms intersecting the coniferous trees, and occasionally a silver thread which she knew to be a gushing mountain torrent. As the land rose so she increased her altitude.

Directly in her line of flight was an almost vertical mountain cliff. She calculated the summit to be well over five thousand feet, and about two thousand feet above her present altitude. The plane lifted. The gaunt, colourful cliff came at her. Below her was a stony valley, a forced descent into which would have spelt disaster.

Like a bird the plane took the summit, with but three hundred feet to spare. Beyond it the land sloped away again. She was passing down a marvellous alpine corridor, with the timber spreading away on either side. It was an adventure that appealed to her love of Nature and of solitude. Save for occasional birds no living thing could be seen. The whole marvellous vista seemed to be stamped with the first mark of creation.

She fell into a reflective mood as the engine throbbed its steady note. Civilisation, science, were making life different. Here was she—Helen

Mandison—a mere girl, flying over country where perhaps no human foot had ever trod, with the possible exception of nomadic Indians, killing space at close upon a hundred miles an hour. Fifty years ago how impossible it would have seemed! And only last night a man had hinted that her life was humdrum.

Humdrum! She laughed and came down a little, for the valley was slowly descending and the timber getting thicker and bigger. Then she remembered her quest—and the small package that might save human lives. Another hour would probably bring her to that infected, isolated village, and she wondered if in the circumstances the doctor would insist upon vaccinating her?

Again the valley on one side, but the wooded cliffs on the other grew even steeper. Her gaze was arrested by a break in the timber on the cliff-side. She saw a mass of piled-up rock, and perching on the topmost piece a large bird, which looked like a king eagle. He rose as the plane grew near, and clove upwards at great speed. She slowed down a little in order to get a better look at him—and then the unexpected happened. In her line of flight, right under the eagle, was a smaller bird. Before she could think, the eagle turned and dropped like a stone on its intended prey. Quickly she closed the throttle and attempted a nose dive, but almost instantaneously there was a violent thud—and then the machine went completely out of control.

She was dimly aware that she was in a spin—

crashing to earth at a tremendous pace. She guessed she must have hit the eagle, and smashed the propeller or some other vital part of the machine. Though but half-conscious she strove to get the machine under control, and then came a fearful crash, a kind of pain in her head, and oblivion.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER III

HER next sensation was that of smooth motion in pitch darkness. Slowly her brain began to function, and automatically she put out her hand to feel for the controls, but it met something soft and woolly. She recalled the great bird—her attempts to avoid hitting it—the sickening falling motion. . . . What was this, then? Was it death, and a subsequent journey in the shades—to what lay beyond death?

Then something was moved, and brilliant sunlight fell on her face. She looked and gasped. She was in a long canoe, which was being borne along on a swift stream, between high banks of spruce. Facing her were two paddlers, who were driving their paddles deep into the foaming water, and behind them two other men. All were Indians of a type she had never seen before. She had heard that in the mountains there were many such men, who refused to be penned up in reservations and eked out a precarious living from the rivers and forests.

Since it was undoubtedly early morning she concluded that a whole night had passed since the accident occurred. Her hand went to her head, which was aching, and the touch caused her to wince. She no longer wore the flying-helmet, and in its place was a rough bandage. Evidently she had suffered from slight concussion. Suddenly she sat up and addressed the Indian immediately in front of her.

"What happened to my airplane?"

He grunted something in a strange tongue, and then rapped out what appeared to be an order. The vertical dips of the two paddles were changed to a sweeping motion, and the canoe turned and was deftly piloted between two tongues of rock, and moored to a leaning tree.

The four men stepped out, after flinging some gear ashore, and she was motioned to follow suit. She felt a little dizzy as she stood up, but she made the bank with the aid of a long, dark arm, and there sat down on a sack of gear, while the men prepared a fire.

The carcass of some animal was roasted on a spit, and she was offered a portion on an old enamel plate. There was only one knife, and that a hunting-knife, so she was compelled to eat with her fingers, and later to slake her thirst by drinking from the river in her cupped hands. Feeling stronger, she approached him who appeared to be the leader.

"Can you speak English?"

He shook his head.

"Français? Parlez-vous français?"

There was another shake of the head, and then a question was put to her which she did not understand. It was exasperating to be in that position, and not to be able to get any details concerning her position, the airplane, and their intentions. But they on their part did not appear to suffer from any such troubles. After the scant meal the canoe was re-entered. All morning and afternoon the river was followed, and late in the evening another meal was taken ashore, from the same carcass.

After there was a portage. The canoe was taken out of the river, and the four men carried it on their shoulders over very broken ground, inland. The work was hard, for the canoe contained all their impedimenta. At last, weary and worn, she was permitted to halt in a clearing. Here the Indians erected two small tents and a fire was got going. It was soon obvious that they intended camping here for the night. Fears began to assail her, but she did her best to brush them aside. In all probability they were just poor struggling nomads, taking her to the nearest white settlement. In any case, they had undoubtedly saved her life.

But when another meal was eaten and twilight began to fall there entered a new factor into the situation. An argument started amongst the men, and she knew instinctively that she was the cause of it, for glances were continually cast in her direction. It ended with the owner of the hunting knife leaping up and exposing the blade towards the man whom she had taken to be the

leader. But the leader owned the one rifle, and in a moment it was in his hands.

This caused a kind of stalemate, and the two other men intervened. One of them spoke quickly and at some length, and then all of them nodded their heads. They had obviously come to an agreement, and the man with the knife went off some distance and returned with about a dozen pieces of rock. These he evenly distributed, and a kind of game was started. What the rules were and what constituted the winner it was impossible to say, but finally the man with the knife uttered a cry of triumph and scooped up all the bits of rock. He flung them away from him and then came close to her, making motions.

There was no misunderstanding them. She realised that they had been playing for possession of her; that this copper-skinned, half-clad creature with the oily eyes had won her—won her in a kind of raffle!

Her gorge rose at the indecency of the thing. Her first impulse was to raise her hand and hit him in the face, but common sense whispered that such an act would be both futile and stupid. His hand was now on her arm. She pushed it away gently but firmly, and his companions laughed. The scornful chorus seemed to infuriate the winner of the raffle. He caught her again, and this time firmly.

"Wait!" she said. "If you will escort me to my home I will reward you well."

She knew perfectly well that not one word of

this would be understood, but it was something to hear her own voice—like an assertion of her independence, which she had so much valued. But the grip on her arm was maintained, and she was led to one of the tents. Her lord and master then went back to his companions, and appeared to be discussing his prize. The mere fact that he had left her thus unguarded went to prove that he did not even remotely consider the possibility of her taking flight. And this convinced her that there was nowhere to flee to, except the inhospitable forests, where she would surely starve.

She was cudgelling her brains to discover some way out of this awful predicament when she heard the unmistakable sounds of a horse's hoofs as they came into contact with the projecting slabs with which the region abounded. Looking out she saw a laden mule coming up a track quite close to the camp. Beside it was a man in tattered clothing—a tall man almost as bronzed as were the Indians. But he was undoubtedly a white man, and his presence was as welcome as a regiment of soldiers.

“Heigh!” she shouted. “Coo-ee!”

She saw the stranger pull on the reins of the animal—which, on a closer view proved to be a mule—stare first at the campers and then towards the tent outside which she stood. Without more ado she rushed across to him. Her keen-eyed owner saw this and went after her. She reached the halting man first, stared into his bronzed and bearded face, and appealed to him.

"I have met with an accident. These Indians found me. I want to get back——"

Here the Indian intervened. He looked ugly as he faced the tall white man, and broke into voluble speech. The white man curled his lip and looked at her.

"He says you belong to him," he said curtly.

"Belong—— But surely you understand? I don't know a word of their language, and am a prisoner."

He stared hard at her flying-clothes, and then at the bandaged head. The Indian now laid his hand on her, but was stopped by a quick word and a movement of the white man's hand towards his belt. The other Indians now came ambling along, presumably ready to deal with any trouble. The white man removed his hand from his weapon and commenced to parley. There were savage responses, shaking of heads, and fierce ejaculations.

"What are they saying?" she broke in.

"Don't interrupt!" he snapped.

Then she realised that they were bargaining. He was offering all kinds of things in turn, but these were refused. The Indian who had won her kept pointing to the mule, but the white man shook his head stubbornly. He piled a whole lot of things in a heap and offered them, but the mule was the only thing that would satisfy the Indian. Helen saw its owner glare at her for a second, with something very like contempt in his eyes. Then with an oath he nodded his head.

The mule was quickly stripped of its remaining load and led away. The white man stared at the heap of things, and swore again as he stared through the trees towards his lost beast of burden. Then he swung round on her.

"You'll have to help me with this gear. There's a mile to go yet to my shack."

"Of course," she replied. "I am very grateful."

"Grateful? I've been a damned fool! That mule was worth three women—all the infernal feminine tribe."

She winced at this, but made no response. While he made a huge pack of the miscellaneous objects, he pointed out to her the things she could take as her burden. There were many of them, including a pick and shovel and a washing-pan, and together they were a considerable weight.

"This way," he said. "It will soon be black darkness."

As she struggled along she remembered that she had left the flying-helmet behind, but she dared not suggest going back for it. They passed through a dense wood, and finally came out on the banks of a narrow but deep stream. The man was labouring under his immense load, which was natural in the circumstances, for the woodland path had been uphill all the way.

"What's your name?" he asked suddenly, without turning his head.

"Helen Mandison."

"Mine's Ackroyd—Garth Ackroyd. How did you get into this mess?"

"An airplane accident. A big bird flew into my propeller and brought me down."

"H'm! So you fly airplanes for a pastime?"

"Sometimes—but not always," she retorted.

"A society girl, I presume—with much time on your hands?"

"No, a working girl."

At this he gave a short laugh which irritated her.

"Anything else you would like to know?" she rapped.

"No. You can have the last word. I've already made a darn fool of myself."

"In exchanging a mule for—a woman?"

"Yes. Of course you wouldn't understand, and I don't want to argue. I've said you could have the last word, and you've had it."

"Not yet. I'll have it now. Despite your sacrifice, I think you are unnecessarily rude."

A dead silence followed. Night had now completely fallen, and they were plodding along in darkness beside the noisy stream. Suddenly she saw something whose sharp edge cut off the visible stream. It proved to be a timber shack, and outside it her saviour halted and dropped his big pack. Opening the door, he went in first, and while she lingered to get breath a light appeared. It was an oil lamp hung from the ceiling of a rough, untidy room.

"Come in," he said. "Don't stand there like a dummy."

"Thanks!" she retorted and entered, after discarding her burden outside.

"This is my hut, shack, caboose—call it what you like," he said. "I guess there isn't another within a radius of fifty miles. Well, what do you think of it?"

"You can't expect me to make up my mind in ten seconds."

"Perhaps not; but you'll have plenty of time to make it up."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, here we are—and here we stay."

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER IV

HELEN stared into the tanned face of Ackroyd. His piercing, deepset eyes regarded her almost contemptuously.

"What did you think this was—a kind of city suburb?" he asked.

"But surely there is a means of my getting home?"

"Not a chance—yet a while. I've got work to do up here, and I've just traded the equine locomotive that has been faithful to me for more than three years. You may see a bear at times, and a gang of mangy Indians like that crowd that got the best of a bargain just now. But that's about all. Hungry?"

"No."

"Well I am. You might get busy on that

stove while I round up some grub. There's some kindling wood yonder and a log pile outside. I'll fix you up with a shakedown later."

Thoughtfully she went about her task. It was all so amazing she could scarcely believe she was awake. Only yesterday she had been living a perfectly normal life, with all the comforts and security that a well-managed farm and civilisation could provide. And now this lonely, untidy shack, on the edge of beyond, with the strangest man she had ever encountered! He seemed to take a delight in hard, stabbing words, cynical smiles and peremptory orders. When he looked at her it was with the expression of unveiled contempt—even animosity. Yet his speech and inflexion was that of a man of good education. What age he was it was impossible to guess, for the short stubbly beard was like a mask across his features, but she felt he was young. His walk, carriage, voice—everything pointed to that.

But what was he doing here—far away from civilisation? What did he mean about having work to do, when for hundreds of miles there was nothing but rivers, mountains, and forests? He had mentioned a period of three years. It seemed incredible that any rational person could live in such surroundings for that span of time. Yet she had the feeling that he was the sort of man who would speak the truth naturally. Indeed, her recent experience went to prove that up to the hilt, for he had not attempted to disguise the fact that he rated her far below a mule.

Came the thorny problem of the future. Presumably he had no intention of moving from that isolated spot, and appeared to imagine that she would be content to stay there until such time as he felt disposed to take her to some place where she could get into touch with her people. The idea would have been amusing had it not been so palpably serious. Had she jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire in appealing for, and accepting, his help? No, not quite so bad as that. While he aroused her resentment by his brusque and rude remarks, she did not now experience the deep-seated anxiety which had terrified her less than an hour ago. Overbearing and aggravating he might be, but nevertheless he was a man, and with a code of honour she was convinced, though he might lack common courtesy.

"How's the fire?"

His cutting voice roused her from her reflections.

"Going well now," she replied, without looking at him.

"Here are bacon and beans. Watch 'em, or they'll burn. Catch! Ah, guess I'd better open the cans. No woman ever born can do a small job like that."

"Possibly I've opened more cans than you've ever seen," she retorted. "Throw them over."

"Maybe I was wrong—about that," he conceded, as she commenced to rip off the lids of the cans. "Now I'll fix you up with a shake-down."

While she attended to the cooking he dragged a camp-bed from an inner room, and swiftly got it ready for use. She took it for granted this was intended for her, but when the meal was ready he pointed to the dividing door.

"You'll find a bed in there," he said. "I've put in some clean blankets. You'll need them all because it gets cold up here in the early hours of the morning. Don't burn that oil lamp too long—my supply of kerosene is limited, and there isn't a store round the corner."

She gazed into the inner room and found it much tidier than the living-room, which was cluttered with fishing-rods, guns, and a thousand miscellaneous articles. The bed was a truckle one, and beside it was a very old washstand, with some cracked china on it.

"I don't see why I should rob you of your room," she said.

"You do as you're told. I thought you were tired?"

"So I am."

"Then tumble in, and don't stand there arguing."

"Very well. Good night!"

"Good night!" he muttered.

After all the hardships and terrors of the day it was pleasant to contemplate a night of comparative comfort. She removed the short coat, and was then aware that her head was throbbing. Strangely enough, she had forgotten her injury in the various excitements of the evening. But now it called for attention. She was pouring

out some water into the wash-basin when there came a rap on the door.

"What is it?" she called.

"May I come in. There's something I've forgotten."

A trifle nervous, she told him to enter. He came straight to her and gazed at the bandage, which showed a small pink stain.

"Guess I had better attend to this."

"I can manage," she protested.

"Not so well as I can. Stand still while I get this rag off."

He removed the bandage, and gave a grunt as the wound came to view.

"Another inch to the left and it might have been serious," he commented. "Wait a minute."

He went out and returned with a length of surgical bandage, a swab, and some iodine in a bottle. It surprised her to find a first-aid outfit in such a place.

"I packed it when I first came here," he explained. "I was trained to be a medical student, and that accounts——"

He stopped short, as if he suddenly realised he was saying too much about himself. She permitted him to cleanse the wound with a piece of wet wool, treat it with iodine, and finally re-bandage it. The latter he did deftly, making a neat and workmanlike job of it.

"You'll do now," he grunted.

"Thank you!"

He made no response, but turned on his heel

and went out. The incident stuck in her mind long after she was between the blankets. To assess him at his real value was impossible—yet. But he was interesting, and that was something. It remained to be seen what his intentions were regarding her future. She could not really believe he would blankly refuse to make an attempt to get her back to her home. But, on the other hand, she had seen enough of him to feel that he was strangely wrapped up in himself, and that her arrival made as little difference to him as the flies in June. He had the ability to make her feel conscious of a kind of inferiority complex, and against this she was determined to put up a fight, for she had never had a great opinion of men—least of all men who adopted an attitude of complete detachment and aloofness. Her last thoughts were of Garth Ackroyd, the man who had swopped a mule for her and got what he undoubtedly considered a bad bargain!

The early morning sunshine stole through the forest. Helen stirred to the chirping of birds just outside the shack. She opened her eyes and blinked at the unfamiliar surroundings—the match-boarded walls of the room, the terrible toilet-set, with its cracks and its hideous floral pattern, the bare boards of the floor, and a great cobweb that was spread above the window to catch unwary flies. Then she started to recall the incidents of yesterday, and quickly slipped out of bed.

The sun was now streaming through the chinks in the shutters. She flung them wide

open, and gasped at the vista it revealed. The whole scene was rampant with late summer glory. Through the tall pines she could see the river prancing onward, rippling at the big bend where it swept a swift course over stones and exposed boulders. A bird's sweet voice was ringing like a bell, and the air was odorous from the pines. She gulped in the invigorating atmosphere, pressed her fingers to the bandage, and was comforted to find there was merely a slight tenderness there.

"Hey!"

It was Ackroyd's stentorian voice on the other side of the door.

"Yes," she called.

"Are you going to sleep all morning?" he called. "It's nearly seven o'clock."

"I'm getting up."

She heard him retreat muttering something about "darned women who think they've a natural right to laze about the whole day," and she winced as she reflected upon the injustice of it. Probably he was still mourning the mule—that very appropriate companion of his!

She washed and dressed hastily, and then went into the living-room. Ackroyd had made up the fire and the stove was now almost red-hot. He did not even look at her, but was engaged in an operation that was new to her. From a tub of liquid he was extracting an amalgam of yellow metal and mercury. This was squeezed through a bearskin bag—the metal remaining in the bag, and the mercury going back into the tub. When

he had finished this process the residue was placed in a shovel and laid on the top of the hot stove. What little mercury remained was thus evaporated. The residue was gathered up and stored in a long, narrow sack.

"What is it?" she asked, to curb her curiosity.

"Gold."

"Real gold?"

"What other kind of gold is there?"

"What is the tub for?"

"Must you ask these questions?" he snapped.

"Leave me to my job and get on with yours. We need a meal."

"And you need manners," she replied tartly.

"Does it give you any pleasure to behave like a bear with a sore back?"

He put his fingers to his ears and walked across the hut. Then he suddenly turned on his heel and faced her.

"Now listen!" he said. "I didn't ask you to butt in, and, to be brutally frank, I don't want you. But I've got to make the best of you, because that's the way things have worked out. But if there is one thing I can't stand it is a woman's yapping."

"Yapping!"

"Childish questions. I've already lost a ——"

"How you must have loved it!" she cut in.

"I suppose you called it Mary, and put it to bed at nights. All right, I won't ask you any more questions."

He sighed as she buckled to and prepared a

meal. It meant looking for everything in odd corners, since she was determined not to avail herself of his help. He sat with his back towards her, doing something with some fish lines, and then he went out, and stayed out for some time.

Before he returned she had the meal ready, spread out on a rather soiled cloth. There was very little bread, and this was terribly stale. It was naturally home-made, and very well made she had to admit. This queer man was certainly self-contained. She believed there was little he could not do—except behave like a gentleman.

The source of his food-supply was fairly obvious. There was a very large store of flour, also tinned food, but these she thought were the "extras." The river and the forest provided the main items of the menu. On a shelf was a huge box full of cartridges, and she counted four different guns—two smooth-bores and two rifles. The fishing-rods were legion, and on the wall was a big gaff, presumably for hauling in salmon.

It was apparent that his object was gold, but she had heard that placer-mining scarcely paid anywhere, and if the amount of gold in the shovel had been his haul for one day, the assertion was justified, for at the most it could not have been worth more than ten dollars. Was he content to live and labour thus, far away from civilisation and its amenities, for a reward which undoubtedly he could have earned in pleasanter surroundings.

She imagined what it must be like to live for three years on end by oneself. Even the natural

beauty of the spot would pall after a while. And then there was the winter to be considered—that biting cold winter of the British Columbian uplands, during which he must hunt for his food. What kind of a man was this? What kind of feeling lay under his rough exterior?

“A query mark,” she thought. “And a large one at that.”

Then he came in, scanned the neatly-laid table, and sniffed at the bacon.

“Bread’s a bit short,” he said. “I meant to have baked yesterday. Have you ever made bread?”

“I guess I must have made about a hundred and fifty tons of it by this time,” she replied quietly. “Hadn’t you better have your breakfast before it gets cold?”

“Sure! I’ve been to put a few fish-lines out. What did you say your name was?”

“You’ve soon forgotten.”

“Wal, what’s in a name? I’ll call you Sal.”

“You won’t,” she retorted. “You’ll call me Helen.”

“Have it your own way. It’s all the same to me. Pass the bread, Helen.”

They ate steadily for some minutes. The keen mountain air and the absence of a meal overnight had put an edge on Helen’s appetite.

“So you’re a gold-miner?” she asked suddenly.

“Why not?”

“I’ve no objection,” she replied. “I suppose some one has to dig gold, but I shouldn’t have thought it was worth while.”

"That is where opinions differ."

"And you've been up here three years?"

"Just over."

"All alone—I mean with the exception of Mary?"

"Mary? Oh, I get you. So you've a sense of humour?"

"I hope so. Life would be very dull without it."

"M'm! But your humour is just a little misplaced. An animal isn't a big joke. Mary—his real name was Horatio—had a value which you may never be able to appreciate. He did all the hard, soul-destroying work. It was his lot to fetch and carry for me—even to carry me when I was tired. He never complained, and never asked foolish questions. And he had a kind of beauty of his own. After all, beauty is largely a matter of fashion and taste. There are people who labour under the delusion it is confined to the feminine part of the human race. Well, I've seen lots of women, and many horses—on the whole I prefer horses."

"Quite right," she retaliated. "It is all a matter of taste—good taste and bad taste."

IT was after breakfast that Helen was better able to appreciate Ackroyd's regret for the loss of the mule. She saw him making a big

pack of pick, shovels, washing-pan, and what not, and realised that he was about to set off for the day's toil. She remembered the atrocious track along the river, the occasional steep ascents, and guessed that the carrying of such a load in the fierce heat of an unclouded sun was a laborious and thankless task.

"How far have you to go?" she asked.

"Three miles."

"Hadn't I better come and help you with that gear?"

"Thanks! I guess I can manage."

"Must you bring it all back every day?"

"It isn't absolutely essential, but I guess it's advisable," he replied, hoisting the pack on his broad back. "What do you think a gang of roving Indians would do if they came upon a set of useful tools like these? With an Indian finding is keeping, as you have cause to remember."

This reference to her recent plight annoyed her. It looked as if it gave him extreme pleasure to remind her constantly of her unpaid debt to him.

"When will you return?" she asked abruptly.

"Round about sundown."

"And what do you expect me to do?"

"Do? Make yourself useful. I guess that caboose isn't so spick and span it can't be improved."

"Scrub the floor?" she asked, rather scornfully.

"A good idea. You'll find soap in that box."

Off he went before she could think of a suitable remark. It was a humiliating position for a well-brought-up girl, especially a girl with a deep sense of pride. A feeling of hot revolt swept her for half an hour or so, and she wandered beside the river, vowing that this man was a beast.

Slowly this wore off and she was forced to admit that she had certain obligations. Grudgingly as he had given the mule, he had given it nevertheless, and she had just had an ocular demonstration of what the loss of the beast of burden involved. Her viewpoint shifted a trifle. There appeared to be two alternatives—the first to defy him and his domineering ways, and the second to prove to him that she was not quite the weeping, useless female which he evidently visualised as being fully representative of her sex.

Later on she found the soap and a tin bucket, and set to work on the untidy, congested living-room. To make a sound job of it she removed every article outside, and brought corns on her hands by violent use of a very heavy scrubbing-brush. Her quiet sense of humour saved her. She who had recently refused a young man with excellent prospects was now a kind of unpaid charlady to a man who rated her much below horses and a trifle below a mule.

By noon the cleaning was finished, but it left her with the job of rearranging the furniture and the thousand and one oddments. This was no simple task, for there was a lack of shelving, and a great many things had to be piled in corners ;

but the final result was very satisfactory, and she had to admit that it was worth while.

To her surprise Ackroyd came home much earlier than she expected. He stood framed in the doorway gazing with wrinkled brow at the transformation. Then he looked at her, and she met his gaze without a movement of her features.

"Well I'm ——!"

"What's wrong now?" she asked.

"Now I won't be able to find a darned thing."

"I'll find it for you," she retorted.

He suddenly saw a bundle of letters lying on top of a small table. He went to them and gripped them tightly in his hand. Then a look of fierce anger blazed in his eyes.

"Where did you get these?" he demanded.

"I don't know. They just turned up—from some muck-heap."

"Have you read them?"

The blood left her cheeks, for the insult went deeper than all his former contempt and harshness.

"You dare suggest that—to me," she said in a low, hoarse voice. "Are you used to the kind of women who read private correspondence? No wonder you rate them low. Well, I am beginning to understand the kind of person——"

"Wait!" he cut in. "I had no right to say that. It was mean—totally unmerited. I am rattled because the gold has petered out. That's why I came home. But these letters—I thought I had destroyed them long ago. Have done with them now. Pah, they are poisonous!"

With this he raised the iron flap of the stove and threw the bundle inside. For a second he stood there, apparently wrapped in thought that was by no means pleasant. With her worst anger evaporated she found herself filled with pity for him. Something was wrong—dreadfully wrong—and she wished she knew what it was.

"So the gold has petered out?" she asked quietly.

It was a praiseworthy and generous gesture on her part to attempt to rescue him from the troubled waters of the past, and from his reaction she knew he appreciated it. His voice was well controlled when he spoke again.

"It's always doing that. You get down to bedrock, and strike good pay dirt. It puts you up in the clouds and you imagine it is going to last for ever. Then nothing but gravel-muck, and all your digging in vain."

"Better luck next time."

"Thanks!"

"Did you bring the gear back?"

"No, I've taken a bit of a risk. I've hidden it all under a bush. Now I'm hungry."

"I'll cook something," she said.

"Maybe there's a fish on one of the lines. I'll go and see."

He came back with a fine three-pounder, which she fried to a nicety. But there were no potatoes, and canned beans had to be resorted to as a vegetable. After the meal she broached the subject that was uppermost in her mind.

"About my getting home?" she commenced.

"Eh?"

"I've got to make an attempt. By this time my father will be worrying himself to death. What is the best thing to be done?"

"There's nothing to be done—yet."

"But you don't suggest I should stay here, and not stir a finger to relieve my father's anxiety?"

"You don't know this country. It's a mass of ravines, rivers, almost impenetrable forests. It took me five weeks to get here from Calgary, and I had a mu——"

She winced at the mention of the lamented Horatio, who was flung into her teeth so incessantly, and was actuated into striking back at him.

"You mean you are not willing to help me get home?"

"Not yet. I've got work to do here."

"Hunting a few grains of gold?"

"You're wrong," he snapped. "It isn't a few grains I am after. It is something big and valuable. For three years I've been searching for it——"

"For what?"

"Something that was lost here twenty years ago, something that will enable me to pay off a debt—to certain people. I don't intend leaving until I've found—what I want."

"You are very mysterious."

"I intend to keep my own counsel. I believe in paying off debts, don't you?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing."

"You are. You mean I am indebted—to you, and——"

"I don't. I mean unwittingly you have put me in a devil of a hole, and you can't reasonably expect me to alter my plans now. I mean to stay here—until I have found what I want."

"Thanks for being so frank," she said. "That means I must look after myself."

"There's nothing you can do but accept the situation."

"That remains to be seen."

It seemed to her they could not talk for a few minutes without quarrelling. Any prolonged argument seemed to irritate him beyond measure. But she noticed that after any particularly bitter remark he appeared to be sorry, though he would seldom admit it.

During the next few days she thought a great deal about the possibility of getting home. She found a map and could locate her position roughly, but the scale of it was small, and there was no means of knowing exactly what kind of country intervened. But since it had taken Ackroyd five weeks to reach the place from Calgary, she was bound to realise the hopelessness of the task—carried out single-handed.

Then she considered the position from the point of view of her father and brother. They would naturally conclude that she had crashed and would start a search for her. They might find the remains of the airplane, but she had no

means of knowing how far she had travelled in the canoe with the Indians. In such a vast expanse of country that tiny shack was equivalent to a lost needle in a haystack.

"Why not try to be content?"

Ackroyd broke in upon her reflections, as if he had read what was passing through her mind.

"Would you be content in the circumstances?" she demanded.

"It's a novelty, and I thought women liked anything novel."

"What do you know about women?"

"A whole lot I wish I could forget," he retorted.

"It wouldn't take you long to forget all you know."

"I thought I hated silence, but now I begin to pine for it again."

"You—you bear!" she cried, and walked out of the shack.

The sun was now low in the west, and the incomparable beauty of the scene held her spell-bound for a few moments. Here she was striving to get back to her people, while Nature was telling her that the prairie and the foothills had nothing so marvellous as this to offer. Examining her own soul she found that the desire was not so genuine as she tried to think it was. Apart from relieving her father's anxiety there was little desire at all. Perpetually stabbed and wounded by the keen thrusts of Ackroyd's tongue, amazed at the stubborn

refusal on his part to put himself out for her, she yet was deeply interested—tremendously moved by him.

Most of the men she had come into contact with had showed a tendency to flatter her. She knew this was but a salute to her youth and undeniable beauty, and had never been greatly excited about it. On the contrary, compliments more often than not bored her dreadfully. It was something to come across a man who had no parlour tricks of this kind, and who even overdid the frank and candid sort of commentary, to the extent of rudeness.

She was vaguely aware too that underlying her eminently practical nature was a rich streak of romance. So far there had been no outlet for this. Like most girls, she had gone to literature to release this valve, until she had grown up, and with a smile had abandoned those magical lands of quite impossible events. But now had come a kind of renaissance. Everything in this wild spot was conspiring to foster it. She did not intend losing her head, snatching at make-believe when reality was just round the corner. But Garth—the name was always in her mind if not on her lips—Garth was appealing to her imagination. What did he ask of life? What thoughts, hopes, aspirations lay close to his heart? Was he nothing better than a gold-fiend, placing base metal above every other consideration? What had poisoned him, to cause him to vent such vitriolic wrath upon her and her sex—and upon most other things?

"Little idiot!" she muttered, castigating herself. "The man's not worth thinking about."

Later, in the trembling twilight she came back to the shack. Ackroyd was sitting staring at a curious kind of chart that was spread out on the table. When he looked up and saw her he folded up the chart and thrust it into his pocket.

"You didn't make a bad job of this room," he said.

"Oh, thanks! I thought it had passed your observation."

"Well, I hate things being moved about, but I guess it became necessary."

"Yes—about three years ago."

"You mustn't get caustic, Helen."

"I'm just learning my lessons by heart. I suppose you're getting hungry again?"

"No. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Good! Funny how we never agree."

She stared at him fixedly.

"Do you think we ever shall?" she asked.

"H'm. I should doubt it," he replied briefly.

"Better let me attend to that wound."

"There's no need. It seems to have healed beautifully. I shall not wear the bandage again."

She retired early as usual, and slept well. It was after breakfast the following morning that a totally unexpected thing happened. Ackroyd was preparing to depart when a band of Indians arrived. Helen gave a start as she recognised

them as the band who had recently brought her down the river, and with whom Ackroyd had bargained.

"What's the trouble now?" he muttered, as the leader approached the open door.

"Are they—friendly?" she whispered.

He made no response, but she saw him pick up a rifle from the corner, examine the magazine swiftly, and lay it on the table just behind him. The leading Indian—the man who had taken possession of the mule—began to talk in guttural tones. Ackroyd listened with wrinkled brow. Helen watched his countenance rather than the Indian's, for it was more expressive, and clearly showed that trouble was brewing. The other Indians came forward and joined in, waving their hands about furiously.

"The fools!" muttered Ackroyd.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"They have let that mule die—I don't understand what has happened. They now accuse me of trading a dying mule, and they won't stand for it."

"But what——?"

"They want you."

Her face blanched as the full significance of the situation was borne home to her. She looked from Ackroyd to the Indians, and was conscious of the small part which she herself played in this drama. They were looking at Ackroyd—not at her. She was but the pawn in the game—to be pushed from one side to the other, without being consulted.

"Tell them to go," she said. "Why don't you——?"

"Wait! They've a new proposal. They seem to have recently hit upon the idea that you may be worth something to them. They promise to escort you home, deliver you to your people, for ten ounces of gold."

"But would they?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know. What is the alternative?"

"Staying here—until I'm ready."

"But what will they do if—if I prefer to stay?"

"They may start a fight. I don't know. It depends upon what chance they think they stand."

Again she found herself in an ignominious position. To go meant undertaking a big risk; to stay meant involving him perhaps in a bitter and probably bloody affray.

"What am I to do?" she stammered.

"Decide—and quickly."

"Very well. I decide to go."

"You mean—with them?"

"Yes, of course. Tell them——"

He seized her arm and stared into her eyes. Then he seized the rifle and rapped out something to the Indians. A look of hate came into the eyes of the leader, his hand went to the rifle which he carried across his shoulder, but Ackroyd pushed the barrel of his weapon forward, until it came within an inch of the man's

chest. He was driven backwards through the door, which Ackroyd slammed and bolted.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

"Why did you pretend?"

"Because you forced me to. I would have gone if only to have asserted my independence."

"Independence! What independence would you have enjoyed there? Pah, I wouldn't trust them with my grandmother!"

"Then why ask me to decide, when you could have decided for me?"

To this he was silent. He had crept to the door and was listening to what was going on outside. It brought her to an appreciation of the situation. It was no time for comparatively trivial quarrels.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. All I do know is that whenever a woman steps into my life she brings trouble with her."

"Then why fight for her?"

"God knows! Men have done that all through the world's history. It's a kind of bug that is in their veins."

"Why not give them the ten ounces of gold and get rid of them? Regard it as a loan to me."

This apparently sensible suggestion caused him to survey her with amazement.

"Do you think I'm the sort of yellow cur to be coerced by a pack of Indians?" he snapped. "If they are really wanting trouble they can have it. Maybe they are spoiling for a fight."

She could not help smiling at this naïve

remark. It was clear to her which one was spoiling for the fight, and she was rather glad he had that "bug" in his veins about which he had spoken so scathingly.

"You're marvellous!" she murmured.

"Marvellous?"

"Yes, marvellously stubborn, and hopelessly prejudiced. If I thought——"

"If you wouldn't keep talking, perhaps I might overhear what they are saying," he cut in. "Stand behind that stove, and keep out of the line of fire, in case that fool with the antiquated blunderbuss suddenly goes off his head."

But she remained just where she was, and waited for what might happen next.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER VI

ACKROYD was standing by the jamb of the door, rifle in hand and ear pressed towards the timbers, with a view to overhearing the low conversation outside. Helen gave a glance at his bronzed, tense face, and saw the muscles moving silkily in his forearm as his finger played around the trigger-guard of the rifle.

"Going!" he muttered. "Well, it will save me a few rounds of ammunition——"

Suddenly a rifle cracked outside, and a shot splintered the door, hit the stout iron stove, and splashed itself about the hut. Ackroyd opened

the door a few inches, pushed the barrel of his rifle through, and fired three shots in quick succession. A defiant yell came back.

"Running," he said. "I knew they'd run at the first whistle of a bullet round their heads. They haven't the guts of their ancestors. But——"

He put down the rifle and stared uncomprehendingly as he saw Helen holding her right arm in her left. It was a dripping of blood to the floor changed the expression of bewilderment to one of deep concern. Swiftly he tore away the sleeve of her blouse and exposed a small jagged wound.

"Bit of lead from the bullet," he said. "Only a glancing wound. Why didn't you do as I told you, instead of standing there exposing yourself. You might have got the whole dose."

"Would that have mattered?"

"Mattered!" He glared at her.

"It might have solved an awkward problem for you—the problem of my ultimate disposal."

He put his hands to his ears as he strode across to a drawer and took out some lint and bandage. In silence he sterilised the wound and deftly bandaged it.

"Thanks!" she said.

He stood regarding her, hands on hips and a length of bandage dangling from his fingers.

"I wonder what you'll go and do next?" he muttered.

"Time will show," she retorted.

He went to the door, and saw the Indians a

long way up the trail, slouching along with their heads together.

"Lousey lot," he commented. "I hope they'll fight shy of this place in future. They'd lift every bit of gear I've got if they could lay their dirty hands on it. Well, now I'm beating it. That rifle's loaded. If you want me fire it through the window——" He stopped and stroked his unshaven chin. "No, I guess you had better come with me this morning. I'd like to feel that that crowd is well away——"

"I'm not afraid," she replied.

"Do as you're told!"

"Thanks! I prefer to stay here."

"Stay then!"

She was sorry when he had gone. It would certainly have been much pleasanter viewing the scene of his labours than killing the long hours in and about the hut. But his tone offended her—his "Do as you're told" and the expression which accompanied it. Yet he had displayed obvious concern when he had seen her holding her injured arm!

From the half-open door she watched him striding down the path that fringed the narrow creek, walking like a god in the sunlight, hands thrust deep in his pockets and head erect. He seemed to her to be the perfect savage, a man with no regard for anything but his own well-being, the product of such an environment as this, where wild and untamed Nature held sway. Civilisation had, apparently, done nothing for him. She was but a straw in the stream that ran

through his circumscribed life. He was indeed a perpetual challenge to her ideas of equality.

She was fast coming to believe that if he came back one evening and found her dead he would shovel her into a shallow grave, eat a good supper and go to sleep. The next day he would doubtless go and dig for gold—that thing much more precious in his sight than any living creature!

But would he? There had been brief moments when she had seen him relax—when all the steel bonds fell away from him, like hoops from a barrel. She had seen him gazing with twinkling eyes at the antics of a brown squirrel in a tree. Then he had caught her eye, and flung a stone at the creature!

“Man, the inscrutable!” she murmured.

Came a burning desire to follow him to his “diggings” and be initiated into the business of winning gold from the earth. He would probably sneer at her, make some caustic remark, but what did it matter?

Two minutes later she was following the path he had taken, nursing her injured arm, but almost oblivious to the burning pain. How could one groan and repine on such a morning? The smell of the pines, the colour and music, the reaction to the sunshine that pierced through her very being. A shack in the wilderness—a man who insulted her! It was all part and parcel of an entirely new and absorbing experience.

She lingered for some minutes beside a woodland pool, stagnant and repelling. It was alive with unseen creatures, who disturbed the thick

slime with their motions. Quick life being born out of decay ! And above the fringe of green-coated water grew chaste, scented flowers in profusion. A gigantic frog, seeking the water, startled her by a prodigious leap. He landed on a flat stone above the noisome pool, and his great eyes were like jewels in the sunlight. A movement on her part set him leaping in a parabolic curve, which finished in the pool itself.

She imagined herself as Eve, with the six days' creation spread about her, and her Adam somewhere ahead delving into Mother Earth for the dross he cherished. The simile stuck in her mind as she went forward, and very soon she heard the sounds of his labour, finally to come upon him wielding a pick in a shallow working beside the creek. The noise of the pick among the stones drowned the sound of her footsteps, and he was not aware of her presence until she coughed and caused him to turn round on her, the pick half raised in his muscular hands.

"I changed my mind," she said.

"Ah, I thought you might."

"How clever of you !"

"Not a bit. It's a way that women have. Don't stand there or you'll stand a risk of getting hit."

She moved slightly as the pick came down. Its shining end clove through shallow rock and became deeply and firmly embedded. He heaved powerfully on the haft and levered out the obstructing rock, pitching it with his hands clear of the excavation.

"Why did you change your mind?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Don't you have a definite reason for doing things?"

"Not always. Why should I?"

"Most rational creatures do."

"But why be rational? Nature isn't rational."

"I'll say she is," he retorted.

"Your experience has been different from mine then."

"Maybe. Ah, that's better. Now I can use the spade."

In a very short time he was through the opposing loose rocks and the brown earth which held them. She saw gravel come up in the shovel, and as the mine got deeper he made a separate heap of this gold-bearing soil.

"Is that what you call the 'dump'?" she asked.

"Sure. It doesn't look very good to me at the moment."

"I suppose you'll wash it?"

He nodded and went on with the gruelling work. The sun was now beating down on the site. Already he was working in nothing but breeches and shirt, but the shirt was growing visibly wet with perspiration. He halted for a few moments, glared at her, and then without more ado removed his shirt by pulling it over his head.

"You'd better run around," he said.

"Why? Do I disturb you?"

"No."

He stuck the spade savagely into the gravel, and began to dig more furiously than ever. It was impossible not to admire the physical perfection of his body. That he had worked thus—half-nude—many times was apparent from the mahogany tint of his skin. All the muscles from his neck to his waist were in constant play, like the actions of a very intricate and undoubtedly beautiful machine.

A little later she took his advice and wandered afield. Farther down the creek she found many signs of recent work on his part. Holes had been dug everywhere. In some places they extended continuously for thirty or forty yards. In others there was nothing but a short trench, presumably abandoned when it failed to yield the precious metal which so intrigued him.

The farther she roamed the more entrancing the scenery became. At that high altitude there was an absence of rank grasses and thick undergrowth. Save for fallen trees there was little disorder. It gave her the impression of having been planned by some almighty hand, with harmonious results. Through vistas of pine and spruce came sections of distant mountains—the white, milk-like patches and streaks of snow against the unbelievable blue of the mountain bulk. Farther afield, cradled between vast shoulders, an indescribable glacier, melting off far below to form a silver stream.

Filled with unusual thoughts she wended her

way back to the creek, and found Ackroyd now engaged in washing his "pay dirt." He was in bad humour, for the amount of gold so far collected was negligible.

"No luck?" she asked.

"Muck—rank muck! I must have earned nearly two dollars this morning," he added cynically.

"Why go on?" she asked calmly.

"Why go on—with anything?" he retorted.

"Why not sit down and howl when things don't pan out well? I've known this happen to me hundreds and hundreds of times."

"And the fever persists?"

He stole a glance at her, as if he scarcely knew what lay behind this somewhat cryptic remark.

"Fever?" he repeated. "All life's a kind of fever. I guess you're full of romance, like most women, and you can't see much in sweating and slaving like this?"

"It depends upon motives."

"Motives! Yes, you're right. I've got nothing against romance. All work's romance. Didn't some one say it was romance that brought in the nine-fifteen, or words to that effect? He was right. At the back of the mind of the fellow who lies on his back a thousand feet below the earth's surface, with coal dust filling his lungs, there's romance. He's doing it all for a wife, or half a dozen hungry kids, or maybe only to buy a ticket for a football match."

"And when there's no wife, no hungry children, no football match—as with you, for example?"

"There are other things equally more desirable—no, ten thousand times more desirable. There's——"

"What?"

He gave the washing-pan several fierce shakes, poured off the coloured water, fingered the residue, and flung it away with a scowl.

"You were saying?" she asked.

"I was talking a lot of rubbish. This place is no good. I'll have to make a fresh start. Somehow I knew it wouldn't yield an ounce. My luck is out—rotten!"

"It's past noon," she said. "Hadn't you better have a meal before you make a fresh start?"

"I don't eat in the middle of the day."

"Well, it's time you changed your habits. Working in the sun for eight hours on end isn't good for you, or for any man. Do you want to be old at forty?"

He laughed and then recalled some lines:

What shall I be at forty
Should Nature keep me alive,
If I find the world so bitter
When I am but twenty-five?

"Where did you read that?" she asked.

"God knows. But you're right. We'll hike back and have a bite of food. Ready?"

"Yes."

"I am—nearly."

He grabbed his discarded shirt, went down to the creek, leaned over, and bathed his

half-naked body in the clear, cold water. The shirt was used as a towel.

"That's better," he said. "I guess it is time this article had a wash, anyway."

They walked back to the hut together, and Helen prepared a kind of picnic meal, which they ate in the shade of the pines beside the river.

"Must you go back again to-day?" she asked.

"Sure!"

"Is there nothing else in the world worth thinking about but gold-dust?"

"There's this," he said, spreading out his hands to indicate the incomparable scenery. "But one doesn't have to think about that. It is always evident."

"You have no appreciation for the things that are evident and obvious?"

He looked at her almost appealingly.

"For God's sake don't start lecturing me again," he said. "Curious you can get any pleasure out of it."

"So you think that?" she retorted.

"You make me think that. But have done with bickering. I'll take a half-holiday. There's a queer cave I've always wanted to explore. It's a five-mile walk each way, so don't expect me back until fairly late."

"Don't worry," she replied. "I'm coming too."

"Ten miles is a long way in this neighbourhood."

"That means you don't want me to come?"

"I never said so."

"But you mean it. The sooner somebody, or something, cures you of the habit of self-sufficiency the better. I'm interested in caves. Who isn't?"

"All right," he agreed. "If I start arguing you'll probably get the last word. Let's hunt out some candles."

She was thrilled with the idea of an excursion, and a cave was still as attractive a thing as Nature could produce. They found half a packet of candles, from which Ackroyd took two, and a little later started off through the forest.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER VII

THE path followed by Ackroyd led directly away from the river, across a densely timbered valley. The path soon faded out, and the direction became a matter of sheer woodcraft. For miles they walked on an unending carpet of dead pine needles, and the silence was overwhelming.

Ackroyd's pace was fast. He seemed to take a delight in keeping just ahead of her, as if to avoid conversation, his alleged habitual bugbear. Helen found the going laborious, but was far too sensitive on the point to admit it. Once or twice he turned his head to find her close to his elbow, determined not to be accused of inefficiency.

"H'm!" he grunted, after about half an hour's dead silence. "Not so bad."

"What isn't?"

"The pace. But I guess you're feeling it?"

"Not a bit. I'm enjoying it."

"Good!"

Notwithstanding he sat down on a fallen tree and lighted his pipe. She stood gazing into the distance, seeing nothing but trees and warm brown pine needles, with small patches of blue sky where the straight trunks grew less densely.

"We're half-way," he said. "But the next half is the worst. That's why I hustled a bit. There's a nasty kind of ravine to cross—a razor cut that would take miles to circumvent. Are you ready?"

"Waiting."

"Come on then!"

There was another half-mile of plateau, and then they came to a ledge overlooking a deep and precipitous ravine. It was obviously due to some convulsion of Nature in the past, and was like a horrid scar on the face of the fair earth. It was about a hundred yards wide and three hundred feet deep. From where she stood Helen could see no way down.

"To the left," said Ackroyd.

They moved along the ledge and soon came to a place which offered a possible descent. It was here that Ackroyd noticed something which she had overlooked. He stopped and picked up the object. It was half a cigarette, and it was still smouldering.

"Queer!" he muttered. "I've never known an Indian smoke that sort of——. There's been a white man here—and a horse. The animal put its hoof between those two rocks and fell. You can see where his rump hit the ground——"

He was suddenly stopped by a hoarse cry, which seemed to come from immediately below them.

"There's a man down there!" ejaculated Helen.

"Sure! Maybe a horse too. I guess they took a bad fall. I'm going down. You wait here."

He went over the ledge, and commenced to descend an almost vertical slope. To keep his balance he had to cling to projecting slabs of rock, and to advance with the greatest caution. Soon she lost sight of him, but could hear him at times. Then came silence and a long, anxious wait, but finally she saw the top of his hat appear and then the whole of his person. He struggled up to the path and stood panting for a second or two.

"Well?" she asked.

"An accident. There's a fellow below with a broken leg. He's got a pack-mule up here somewhere. The animal slipped and pushed him over the side."

"How dreadful! Can't we get him up?"

"Nope. The only way is to find the mule, and get it down into the ravine. It means following this ledge for two miles, where there is a good descent."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Ordinary kind—Government Survey Department," he said. "But his conversation was naturally limited. I had to fix a temporary splint. Now for that darned mule."

She followed him along the ledge, and in places she could see clearly the impress of hoofs on the softer patches of ground. At last the animal was seen. It was grazing on a small patch of grass fifty yards to the left of the ledge. Its packs were still intact, but had been shifted to one side by the fall it had taken. When Ackroyd approached it, it began to run.

"Tck! Good boy!" he called. "Come here!"

The wicked-looking creature turned its head half-round and put its ears back. Ackroyd picked a handful of grass and approached it cautiously. He was within six yards of it when the animal bolted and halted fifty yards away.

"Idiotic animal!" he growled. "Hey, Helen, move round to your right and shush him back here. I'll try to grab him."

For the next few minutes an exciting but tiring game of hide-and-seek was played, and at last Ackroyd was successful in catching the bridle of the animal. The packs were unlashed and concealed behind a tree-trunk, leaving only the saddle.

"You'd better ride him," suggested Ackroyd. "He may be more under control that way, and I want to hurry."

She sat the beast astride, and after mixed threats and encouragement got him moving. The two miles were covered in quick time, Ackroyd maintaining a jog-trot all the way. A terrifying descent wound down to the ravine, and along this dismal gulley they proceeded, finally to reach the spot where lay the injured man. Helen dismounted, and after hitching the mule to a tree-trunk went to his side with Ackroyd.

The victim of the accident was a man of about thirty-five years of age. He was clean-shaven and neat in his attire. Like Ackroyd, he wore breeches and high lace boots, and he appeared to be about the same height, and of muscular build. There was now a cut on his jaw, and his right leg was in splints, which were lashed to it by a neckerchief and several other items of clothing. His face was expressive of acute suffering, but he contrived to smile when he saw them.

"How is it?" asked Ackroyd.

"Not so bad since you fixed the splints."

"This is"—Ackroyd looked at Helen and hesitated—"Helen Mandison," he added somewhat lamely. "Lucky for you we happened to be headed this way or——"

"I guess you're right. So you found the mule? He's responsible for this. He's sure the silliest thing on four legs. But the gear?"

"I've cached that. Now I've got to get you into that saddle, and it isn't going to be easy—for you."

"Nor for you. I'm all of fourteen stone."

Helen watched the grim business that followed. The slightest movement caused the injured man intense pain, and Ackroyd, with his medical knowledge, was fully aware of it. The best plan was a complete lift in his arms, babywise. He did this with apparently the utmost ease, and in a very few seconds the injured man was in the saddle, with his painful and useless leg tied in the most comfortable position.

"Now we'll get back," said Ackroyd. "Say, can you sit that mule?"

"You bet I can."

Commenced the slow journey home. *En route* they picked up the packs. Some of them were lashed on to the mule's back, the rest Ackroyd and Helen carried between them.

"An unexpected end to our excursion," she said.

"Bad luck! Now what did he say his name was—Sinclair? Can't think why a Government department wants to send a man up here alone. Well, it's his business, not mine."

By the time they reached the hut Sinclair was near complete exhaustion, but it was to his credit that he had borne his suffering without a murmur. Ackroyd got him indoors and laid him on his own bed.

"A nip of brandy will do him good," he said. "Find that flask, Helen."

A new problem was now presented. Since the hut contained but two rooms Sinclair and Ackroyd had perforce to share one of them, and this did not appeal to Ackroyd. It was only

when he was dumping Sinclair's belongings in a corner that he discovered the tent.

"This will suit me," he said. "I'd as lief sleep in a tent as anywhere else. I'll erect it presently. The first thing to do is to make some decent splints."

An hour later Sinclair was much more at ease. Ackroyd had examined the injury and fitted the new splints. He had also managed to undress his patient, who now occupied the bed of his host.

Helen cooked him some food, while Ackroyd rigged up the tent outside. His eyes were on her all the time, and she knew that he was pondering the question of their exact relationship.

"Rather a fortunate thing that Garth knows a good deal about medicine," she said, with a view to breaking the rather embarrassing silence.

"Garth? Oh, I see—Garth Ackroyd. Yes, the whole incident turned out to be lucky for me. But for you two I should have died and rotted. I don't suppose a fellow meets any living soul up here from one year's end to another. Did you say your name was Mandison?"

"Helen Mandison."

"A relation, I guess?"

"No. I met with an accident—something like your own. I hope soon to get in touch with my friends."

"How extraordinary!"

"Yes—very."

"What is Ackroyd doing here?"

She considered the question a little premature, and in bad taste in the circumstances.

"I don't know," she replied. "I think he hunts a bit, and does a little prospecting. You are a surveyor, aren't you?"

"Sure! Mapping this region. There hasn't been a decent map done for twenty years. Pity the other mule got away. But I shall have to find him. He's got all my instruments on his back."

"So there were two mules?"

"Yes. I had an assistant until two weeks ago. He took some kind of illness, ran a high fever every day, and was an infernal nuisance. I found a party of men who were making for the coast and sent him back with them. Since then I've been working single-handed, and I've got to get through before winter comes."

The coming of Sinclair had its advantages and its disadvantages. Helen told Ackroyd about the missing mule and the valuable surveying instruments, and Ackroyd went out several times searching for the animal, without success attending his efforts.

"Of course it's like looking for a needle in a haystack," he complained. "But I reckoned I should have spotted it before now. Well, he can't make maps without instruments."

"How is his leg going on?"

"Quite well; but it's a long job."

"You mean he'll be here a long time?"

"Some months, I guess."

"That'll be rather a strain on the food-supply."

"It will, and he hasn't brought enough to last him a month. Maybe that was lost—with the other mule."

There was a note of scepticism in his voice which caused her to stare at him.

"You don't believe the story about the second mule?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"But why shouldn't you?" she insisted. "There is a bundle of maps with his belongings. If he is doing a map-making job he would have to carry instruments, and——"

"All right," he cut in. "We'll just agree to differ—as we nearly always do."

The snub hurt her, undeserved as it was. Seeking for a reason, she came to the conclusion it was because she had mentioned with some enthusiasm Sinclair's gift of conversation. He had travelled much and was profuse with his adjectives. Overdrawn as some of his pictures were they were nevertheless pleasing to her, and a relief from Ackroyd's habitual silence.

As the days passed Ackroyd seemed to drift farther and farther away, leaving her with Sinclair, who was quick to display his pleasure. Such gold as he won was taken into the tent. But his daily grind did not prevent him from playing the doctor to Sinclair.

"You'll be able to hobble about soon," he said.

"Thanks to you," replied Sinclair.

Ackroyd made no response but went outside. Helen found him later fishing in the river.

"What luck to-day?" she asked.

"None. How's the invalid?"

"Why do you ask me?"

"Well, you ought to know—you are always with him."

"How can I help being with him? I suppose he must eat."

"I suppose he must," he consented.

"Garth!"

He turned his head and saw her eyes surveying him steadily.

"Well?"

"There's something I want to say—something important."

"Go on, then."

"When I asked you to help me get back to my people you said you were too busy."

"Did I?"

"You know you did."

"Where is all this leading?"

"Mr. Sinclair has promised to escort me to the railway as soon as he is well enough."

"Well?"

"I want to ask your advice."

"You want my opinion of him?"

"Well, no. I want to ask you if I shall accept."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not quite. What shall I do?"

"What do you want to do?" he asked, evasively.

"Get home, of course. If you won't help me Mr. Sinclair will, and I feel I ought to relieve my

father's anxiety as soon as possible. To stay here indefinitely, waiting for you to be—less busy—is impossible."

"Then you have already settled the problem—inwardly?"

"No. I am asking you."

"My advice to you is to be satisfied until I am ready to go."

"But when?"

"When I've got what I want."

"But you never tell me what you want," she retorted. "You say you have been here three years. Are you going to stay another three getting what you want?"

"If necessary, yes."

"Thank you! Now I know exactly where I stand. Aren't you just a little like the classical Midas?"

"Midas? Oh, yes, I remember—the man who had a wish, and wished that everything he touched would turn to gold?"

"Yes, but you remember it included the food he had to eat, and he was in danger of starving to death."

He laughed scornfully and cast his line well out into the stream. Then after a few seconds' silence he turned a serious face to her.

"Have you ever wanted something so badly that it represented everything in life, to the total exclusion of all else? Have you ever been willing to sacrifice comfort, civilisation, for the hope—even it is only a hope—of getting even with some one?"

"You mean—revenge?"

"I mean a settlement of accounts—a final reckoning."

His expression was so fierce and repellent she retreated a yard or two.

"I can think of nothing more horrible," she said with a gasp.

"And I can think of nothing more pleasant—to hear them squeal, howl for mercy, and to give none, exactly as they gave none when they held the power. When that day comes I shall live again."

"I think you are mad," she said. "Stark, raving mad. But you have made things clearer for me. Now I know what to do."

She turned and walked away, her heart throbbing painfully. All the good in him seemed suddenly to have turned to mud. He had positively gloated over the prospect of taking revenge on some living creature—he, the man who had given up his bed to a fellow-being in distress. It was all wrong, and so discomfiting to her!

She walked on in the gloaming, threading her way through the still, stark trees. That last remark of his echoed through her brain—"To hear them squeal, howl for mercy." That was not the philosophy of a man but of a brute. . . . Came a curious droning. She stopped and listened. Now it increased, came in pulses louder and louder. It suddenly dawned upon her that it was the sound of an airplane engine! She gazed up and saw the machine pass across an

open patch of sky. It was some one looking for her—her own brother perhaps ! A second later she was fleeing like a deer to the nearest open space from which she could signal.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER VIII

FROM time to time Helen caught sight of the airplane as she raced across the pine needles. At last she stood, breathless, in an open space where she commanded a full view of the heavens. The machine was now about a mile to her left, and turning. She raised her hands and waved furiously, but the full turn was not completed. Once the invisible pilot got the nose of his machine pointing eastwards he opened the throttle wide and went off like a bullet.

She watched him disappear into the blue, and realised that he had not seen her. In all probability he would not search that area again. She could well appreciate his difficulty, for the timber was dense, and even the hut would be concealed from any vertical observation. It meant that she must abandon hope in that direction.

Bitterly disappointed, she turned and made for the hut. Her thoughts turned to Ackroyd and his strange and discomfiting remarks. On whom did he desire to avenge himself, and why ? Consistently he puzzled and annoyed her ; and

yet there was this almost unbidden secret regard for him. But she persuaded herself he was not worth it. Far better cultivate Sinclair's friendship. He at least was frank, human, and amusing.

When she reached the hut, she found Sinclair sitting up, reading a book which he had found. She glanced at the title on the back and saw that it was Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound." Sinclair laid down the volume as he heard her, and turned his head.

"Has Ackroyd got a motor-boat?" he asked.

"No."

"But I thought I heard——"

"It was an airplane. I tried to signal it, but failed to draw the attention of the pilot."

"Some one looking for you?"

"It may have been."

"Bad luck," he said. "That would have made things much easier. I guess you're anxious to get away from here?"

"Naturally. I didn't come here from choice."

"You've never told me what really happened."

"It was an accident. I was flying with some medical supplies to a disease-stricken camp, and I crashed. The airplane was wrecked, but some Indians found me and brought me down the river."

"And Garth was the good Samaritan?"

"Yes."

She refrained from telling him the details of the business, for they were not such as she was

anxious to relate. Then he put an embarrassing question.

“How long have you been here?”

“A month.”

“A month! And Ackroyd hasn’t made any attempt to get you away?”

“Not yet. It was difficult for him without some beast of burden. He had a mule, but that died.”

“Curious chap,” he said musingly. “From the look of this hut he has been here years.”

“Three years, I believe.”

“Looking for gold apparently?”

“Yes.”

“Has he found much?”

“Very little.”

“I could have warned him about that. He’s in the wrong place. Years ago there was a rumour that two prospectors had hit upon a kind of El Dorado in these mountains. They came down to the coast once to get some gear, and then they were missing—never heard of again. I expect they got scurvy and died in some awful hole.”

He looked down at the open book.

“Improving your mind?” she asked.

“I hadn’t any choice. The place contains but two books, an old medical encyclopædia and this volume of Shelley. Fancy bringing a volume of poetry into the mountains!”

“Why not? Aren’t mountains conducive to poetic flights?”

“Well, he doesn’t look that sort of man.”

"He doesn't," she admitted. "But I am beginning to discover that men are in the main unsolved problems."

"I hope I'm not included?"

"You are."

"Then let me solve your problem regarding me. I am thirty-five years of age, born in England, educated in Winnipeg. Unmarried and tolerably happy. Fond of roving about, and quite harmless."

"Thanks!" she said. "Now I had better start in and prepare a meal."

"I wish I could help, but——"

"That's all right. I rather prefer to do things alone."

"Ackroyd didn't make a bad bargain," he remarked as she busied herself with the stove.

"What do you mean?"

"An unpaid cook-housekeeper in return for hospitality. Perhaps that's why he isn't in a hurry to take you back."

The remark did not please her, for she detected malice in the tone of his voice. Many times she had noticed that he referred to Ackroyd in a rather scathing manner, and she considered it not in the best form to attempt to belittle the man who had given up his bed for him.

Ackroyd came into the house to partake of the meal. He brought with him three fishes, which were stored for use on the morrow, and he did not refer to the airplane, though Helen knew he must have heard it, if not seen it.

"It seems colder this evening," said Helen, with a view to making conversation.

"It is," agreed Ackroyd. "Summer's a very brief affair up here. The cold evenings are warnings of winter. You mustn't be surprised to find snow on the ground at any time now."

"Surely not!" said Helen.

"What do you say, Sinclair?" asked Ackroyd.

"You're right," agreed the other. "I've known the snow stay off until November, but not often. On the other hand, I've seen it in September. I don't want to be caught up here for the winter, and have got to get this leg of mine working. By the way, Ackroyd, what's wrong with me using the tent?"

"Nothing."

"Well, suppose we change over? I don't feel happy sleeping in here with you outside."

"Next week," agreed Ackroyd, "when you're fit to walk about a bit."

He went out as soon as the meal was finished. Helen sighed as she got down to the rather thankless task of washing up, and reflected that Ackroyd might at least have offered to help. The thought had scarcely crossed her mind when he came in.

"I've made myself a bit of a camp-fire to-night," he explained. "It gets mighty cold in the early morning. Throw me over that drying-cloth."

"What for?"

"What is a drying-cloth for?" he demanded, and took it by reaching across her.

"I can manage," she expostulated.

"I know."

He started drying the washed crockery, in the awkward fashion that a man seldom succeeds in overcoming. As he worked he had occasional glimpses of himself in the cracked mirror on the wall. She saw him contorting his features.

"In pain?" she asked.

"It's this face fungus," he explained. "Seems to have got out of hand. In mountains during winter it's best to let whiskers grow. But it does have a tendency to detract from one's natural beauty."

"Aren't whiskers natural?"

"As natural as claws, but we don't grow them long. I've got a razor somewhere."

"In the box on the dresser."

"H'm!" he said musingly.

When the job was finished he marched out. Later she saw him squatting by the camp-fire, examining a folded sheet of paper. There was something alluring about the leaping flames in that setting. Like a moth she was drawn towards the conflagration.

"Why not be sociable?" she asked.

"Sociable! I didn't want to butt in."

Her cheeks grew red at this, but she made no comment. It was just the kind of thing he would say.

"They were looking for me to-day," she said suddenly.

"So I guessed, but there wasn't any chance

of giving that pilot a signal. He ought to have stayed longer."

"Could he have landed anywhere?"

"No. I don't know a possible landing-place for a hundred miles."

"Then I haven't lost much."

"No, since you are going back with Sinclair."

"Who said so?"

"You did."

"I said he had asked me, and I am still thinking it over."

"I beg your pardon."

"You don't," she retorted. "Oh, look, there is a spark on the map!"

She put out her hand and brushed away the small burning brand which had blown on to the folded map which he was examining. The map fell to the ground, and she picked it up. On the section folded uppermost she saw some red lines and a cross. It was not the map that was usually lying about the hut, but one which he kept to himself. She had seen him with it before.

"Secret gold-mines?" she asked, as she handed it to him.

He looked at her squarely.

"Yes."

"Well, Sinclair told me there is no gold up here worth digging for. He knows this district fairly well."

"Does he?" he retorted. "Is there anything else he knows?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing."

"But I don't understand you. I'm going to be frank, Garth. Before Sinclair came you were bad enough—pig-headed, rude, and generally mannerless—but now I find you almost intolerable."

"Any more?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, lots. You're a secretive man—retiring within yourself, hiding away your thoughts, and letting all sorts of base emotions rule you. I know it's all bad for you, and I'm telling you so, because I think you are worthy of something better."

Instead of showing annoyance he smiled.

"You want me to unburden my heart to you—lay bare my poor masculine soul, for you to diagnose——"

"No," she retorted. "You know what I mean——"

"Oh, yes—confidences. Come along then, I'll start."

"No you won't. I don't want to hear——"

To her amazement he caught her arm and forced her to sit on the log beside him.

"Now listen!" he said. "For a woman you're not a bad sort. I like your cheek, and your pluck. You're not afraid to say what you think, though you may say it all wrong——"

"Well?"

"Let me say my stuff. You think I'm a poor kind of sap, wasting myself on beds of gravel for a mere glimmer of gold-dust. I'll tell you a secret. For all your overbearing feminine curiosity and uncurbed desire to reform the heathen

—meaning me—you're trustworthy and straight. I never came up here to dig an ounce of gold a day."

"But you're doing it!"

"Some days—as a kind of relaxation. But that isn't the magnet. Do you see this old map? It's older than it looks, and was in a waterproof case to protect it. Those markings are the trails followed by two men ten years ago who stayed up in these mountains for five solid years working out a gold-seam. Despite what Sinclair may say they found it. But they never came home."

The story and the earnest way he told it appealed to her rich imagination.

"You mean they died up here?"

"Yes. I happened to know them. They were the old type of hard-boiled prospector, daring everything on a venture. This map was found by an Indian three years ago, and it finally came into my hands. That cross is the location of the gold-mine. I've been there. There wasn't any gold worth taking. They had worked it clean out, and nearby was a mountain of muck, where they had washed it. Any fool could tell they hadn't washed hundreds of tons of gravel for fun. They left that place, in winter, with a sled packed down with gold-dust. Somewhere near where this map was found they died——"

"Of starvation?"

"More probably disease. But the trail markings are rough. I've tried to follow them a dozen times, but they have led nowhere."

"But the sled and the gold may have been found by Indians years since."

"That's possible; but one always has to take a chance like that. When I come across two skeletons I'll know how my luck stands. But maybe I never will."

"And for three years you have been searching?"

"Yes. It's a long time."

"How much longer do you propose to go on?"

"Until the fever subsides."

"Will it ever subside?"

"Now you're asking a difficult question."

She took this to mean that at this moment there was no sign of any abatement of his desire, and, looking at him, she had further proof in the pugnacious poise of his jaw. It caused her to wonder ought she to admire this driving force in him, or to counter-balance it by placing in the scale his miserable motive, which he had already let escape.

"Why did you tell me this?" she asked.

"The human need of a confidante," he said.

"In a way you were right in what you said, but the trouble is to find people who are worthy of confidences."

When at last she went to bed his last few words lingered in her mind. This man with an aptitude for hurting with his tongue could, when he felt disposed, partly heal the wound. Verily, the more she knew about him the less she knew him.

A MAGICAL morning, with light frost on the ground, and a fantastic bluish mist retreating into nothingness before the advancing sun. The steady music of the river and the mingled songs of birds. All around a peace that transcended imagination.

In the river a brown form swimming like a fish obliquely to the farther shore. A welter of foam as the powerful arms propelled a human body forward. Then a hand-grip on a tree root, the emergence of a magnificent body, a wild kind of dance in the sunshine, and a cleaving of the waters again.

Helen saw it all from the opposite bank, and modestly concealed herself when Ackroyd came out of the river and ran towards his clothing. Ten minutes later she was enabled to meet him face to face, and her astonishment knew no bounds. The beard had gone. A youthful, strong-jawed man was before her. Where the beard had grown the skin was of lighter hue. Ten, twenty years had been shorn from him.

"Can you tell me where I can find Garth Ackroyd?" she asked.

"Laugh!" he said. "Get it over."

"What did you do with the residue?" she asked.

"Residue? Oh, the clippings. Scattered them to the four winds of heaven."

"A pity," she said. "I might have stuffed a cushion."

"And what do you think of it?" he demanded. "Do I look more like your idea of how a man should look?"

"I have few ideas how a man should look. What concerns me more is how he should act."

"Well spoken," he said. "I used to write something like that in a copy-book at school. You haven't come to tell me that breakfast is ready?"

She produced a towel from behind her back.

"No. I wanted to make sure that the bathroom was disengaged."

"I see. Well, get on with it. I'm going to cut some wood away back."

He went off, and she had the whole marvellous scene to herself. On a sloping bank out of sight of the hut she disrobed, shivered a little as she gazed at the cold-looking water, and then summoned her courage and dived straight down into a deep pool. The water struck her warm body like a lash. For a few seconds she coughed and spluttered, while she swam vigorously, and then the sheer joy of the thing began to make itself felt. She shook her short curls above the water, laughed aloud, and swam towards the farther bank.

Ackroyd lingered at his tent to put on a coat which he had left there. The map which he had been consulting was in the tent. For safety's sake he slipped it into his coat pocket. The axe was not there, so he presumed it had been taken into the hut. He entered the place, and found the implement in the wash-house. The door

between it and the living-room was closed. He hesitated whether he should take the opportunity to examine Sinclair's leg, and finally decided he would. The communicating door opened with a push. He found Sinclair sitting up in his bed, staring through the small window which overlooked the river. So rapt was his attention that he did not appear to realise that anyone had entered. One hand held the curtain aside, and his face was pressed close to the pane.

Ackroyd caught a lightning glimpse of the scene which held the other man. The hut was practically invisible from the farther bank of the river, for the pine-trees formed a natural cover, but parts of the distant bank could be seen from the window between the branches of the sheltering trees. Ackroyd had time to see a white, curving body enter the water, and then swim out of the line of vision. It was Helen, all unconscious of the existence of a Peeping Tom. The invalid sighed as he let go the curtain, and then turned his head to meet Ackroyd's flaming eyes.

"I—I didn't hear you come in," he said.

"Obviously."

"Why obviously?"

"You appeared to be engrossed in the scenery."

"Well, why not?"

Ackroyd met the challenging eyes.

"You've got the damned cheek to ask me that?"

"I don't see where the cheek comes in. I

guess I'm human, and if a shapely young girl likes to display her——”

Ackroyd gripped him by the shoulder with such ferocity that he winced.

“Leave her out of it,” he snapped. “She wasn't to suspect that there was anyone round here skunk enough to engage in a low-down game of——”

Throwing off his burning anger, he removed his grip and changed the conversation abruptly.

“Let me look at your leg.”

“The leg's all right.”

“Let me look at it.”

Sinclair scowled as the bedclothes were removed and the splint and leg examined. Ten minutes later Ackroyd was swinging the axe in the clearing, and watching with pleasure the keen blade eating through the soft pine. The incident which he had just witnessed disgusted him, but at the same time it confirmed his worst suspicions of Sinclair.

“Coo-ee!”

It was Helen bounding over the pine carpet, her face aglow, and the wet towel swinging from her hand. He turned his head but once and went on using the axe—almost viciously.

“Ice,” she said. “And fire—strangely mixed. I thought I was going to expire when I first felt the water. Ugh! But afterwards—— Must you go on like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like a human threshing-machine. Stop—before the whole forest is razed to the ground.”

He desisted, leaning on the end of the long ash shaft, and let his gaze wander to her face. It seemed to be the synthesis of all that was youthful and feminine, despite the masculine garb beneath. In the soft, ruddy cheeks were two fugitive dimples, which came and went like water ripples. Below the curving neck was the bare suggestion of heaving breasts—quick life manifesting itself in a superb form. Yet he expressed no admiration. It pleased him to write her down as a daughter of Eve come to his garden to weave a spell, to interpose herself between him and his object, to bring disharmony into what he believed was a very tightly woven symphony.

“So you’re cold?” he asked.

“No, burning hot, and tingling.”

“So am I—for breakfast,” he replied.

She curled her lip and flicked the wet towel at him.

“If ever I go to Heaven,” she said, “and hear a stentorian voice yelling ‘Breakfast’ I shall know that the golden gates have opened to Garth Ackroyd. I fly to obey my lord’s command.”

Half walking, half running, she went across the clearing towards the hut. He heard her voice raised in a lilting song as she disappeared from view, and then he mopped his brow—and swore under his breath.

For the rest of that day he was missing, but evening found him back again, looking weary, and with his boots in a filthy condition. By

deductive processes Helen knew he had not been at work along the creek, but out in search of the thing which he had sought vainly for three years.

Days passed and Ackroyd was seen very little during the daytime. Sinclair was now able to hobble around with the aid of a crutch, and Helen found herself much in his company. It was soon clear to her that he knew Ackroyd had not been gold-digging, and one afternoon he referred to the matter.

"Our host is rather a mysterious personage," he said.

"In what way?"

"Why does he go off tramping many miles almost every day?"

"But does he?"

"Yes. An elementary knowledge of geology, and this district, is sufficient to prove that. That curious mud on his boots yesterday came from a place twelve miles from here. I should like to know what his game is."

"Why not ask him?" she said innocently.

"He's a bear. I say that although I am indebted to him. You can't get within a mile of him. He resents any approach whatsoever. With all due respect to his hospitality, I shall be glad to be packing."

She looked at him keenly.

"You hope to leave—soon?"

"Within a fortnight. I simply must, or I shall get caught by the winter. Have you any idea what winter can be like up here? Why,

it's possible to be completely snowbound for a month on end. I've known it snow for eight days without stopping. Think of it, stuck in this awful place—with him! And what about you? You'll have to come too."

She made no direct reply to this, but the problem was ever before her. She had been secretly hoping that Ackroyd would change his mind and make arrangements to see her to some place where she could board a train. But there had been no such gesture on his part. All that seemed to concern him was a heap of gold—now probably non-existent.

"How long would it take you to reach rail-head?" she asked Sinclair.

"Five weeks, if I can avoid getting caught by heavy snow. If that happens my time-table goes by the board."

"I see," she said, and let the matter rest at that.

It was obvious that something had to be done, and done quickly. She decided that the only sensible thing to do was to talk it over with Ackroyd, and make him see the necessity of fixing some definite plan. She tackled him that evening after a meal. As usual he was sitting before his blazing fire, as if he preferred his own company to that of the other two. His handsome though somewhat dour countenance was illuminated by the leaping flame. She thought he looked hard—relentless as Fate itself.

"I want to talk to you," she said, coming forward.

"Go ahead!"

"I have been talking to Sinclair."

"Is that an unusual thing?"

"He hopes to leave here in a fortnight."

He pretended to be disinterested, but somehow she got the impression that he was listening intently.

"That revives the urgent problem," she added.

"Your departure?"

"Yes. I have been patient all this time, but now a decision must be made."

"You said there was a fortnight?"

"There is; but one can't delay decisions of this nature to the last moment."

"Why delay at all—if your mind is made up?"

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"You want to get back home, and Sinclair is willing to take you to railhead. You trust him—admire him even. I don't see——"

Her anger was being aroused. His whole attitude brought out the most militant and combative part of her being. It was always the same. Never could she succeed in scratching his cast-iron exterior.

"There are none so blind as those who refuse to see," she retorted. "I am asking if you are willing to help me get home, or whether I must accept the escort of a man who appears to be more conscious of my unfortunate predicament."

"I told you I had work to do up here," he replied. "When I have done it——"

"When? This year, next year, some time—never," she quoted impatiently. "It means that I must accept Sinclair's offer."

"There is the alternative of waiting——"

"There is no alternative, because very soon winter will be upon us. Thank you for making the position clear."

She went off, burning with resentment, and he sat on, poking the fire with a stick. Her point of view was reasonable enough, but she did not take into consideration the oath which he had taken long ago to achieve what he had set out to do ere he left this place, or to prove to her complete satisfaction that such an achievement was impossible. It seemed to him that she was disturbing the foundations of his pride, his hitherto unabating endeavour. She had come into his life—unbidden—to taunt him, lure him from the accomplishment of a great project. He meant to fight that disturbing influence, to resist it to the end. Her charm, her intriguing womanhood, the subtle appeal of her sex—surely he was man enough to put them where they belonged—the lower plane of sickly sentimentalism?

While all these considerations marched through his mind endlessly to and fro, Helen had come to a final decision. Her paramount duty was to relieve the anxiety of her father. Sinclair was offering her a chance that might not come again. Nothing could be done for Ackroyd while his soul was anchored to a mirage—gold and revenge!

"You kindly offered to see me safely to railhead?" she said to Sinclair.

"Sure! Nothing would give me more pleasure."

"I shall be glad to come with you, when you think fit to make a start," she said.

"That's fine. I won't keep you waiting long now."

When she passed out of the hut his glance followed her. Fortunately she could not see the expression which passed over his face. It was similar to that which Ackroyd had seen when he surprised him at the window!

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER X

EVERY passing day saw the cold increasing. True, the middle of the day gave the impression of summer, but once the sun had set that illusion passed. On still water ice began to appear, and on the neighbouring peaks Helen saw the snow-line descending.

Sinclair's leg was now practically mended. For the past week he had slept in the tent, while Ackroyd had taken over his old quarters. Helen, who had been waiting anxiously for the day of departure, at last heard something definite.

"I'm making a start to-morrow," said Sinclair, "and we'll have to push ahead pretty fast, if we are not going to get caught by the winter. Do you see the snow on the mountains?"

" Yes."

" The next shower may reach this place. Can you be ready to start at ten o'clock to-morrow ? "

" Quite ready."

" What about Ackroyd ? "

" I will tell him."

" Yes, you'd better."

Now that the crucial moment had come she felt strangely perturbed. It was illogical that she should experience any sort of regret at leaving him, and yet she did. Looking back over the past she could not but recall his antagonism, his constant jibes about her sex. It was true that these jibes had not been repeated of late, but, on the other hand, his indifference to her welfare was maintained. Parting, then, should have been pleasant to contemplate. Yet it was not.

She found him hacking at the stump of a tree with the big axe. Nearby were some steel wedges and a heavy hammer—also a considerable pile of logs. As usual he was putting forth enormous energy. It was the only way he could work—at great pressure. Things had to be done that way, or not at all.

" I have been talking to Sinclair," she said.

" I hope he improved your mind," he replied, without turning his head.

" Your hope is not justified. He didn't even try."

" Getting ready to leave, isn't he ? "

" Yes—to-morrow."

" And you ? "

"I am going with him. That is what I came to tell you."

"What about food?"

"He will arrange that."

He laughed scornfully.

"Don't do that!" she snapped. "There is nothing humorous about it."

"You think not? Well, considering he's been living on my food supply all these weeks, and will need a lot more before he can hit the trail, it does seem a bit humorous."

"But you are not short, are you?" she asked.

"I'm not near the starvation-line, and I guess there are ways to get more food, but I planned to provision myself, and no one else."

"I'm sorry I have encroached," she retorted.

"Oh, you're different."

"Am I?"

"Well, you came here by accident. You couldn't help yourself."

"But so did he."

To her surprise he shook his head.

"But I don't understand you," she said.

"You know what happened to him?"

"I know what he said happened to him. If you're doing nothing you might take an armful of those logs and dump them on the wood-pile."

It was like him to change the subject so abruptly, but she wanted to avoid a quarrel on the very eve of parting, and did as she was bid without another word.

"Did you tell him?" asked Sinclair later.

"Yes."

"How did he take it?"

"Quite casually. But tell me about food. Have you any?"

"No. He will have to help us out."

"But his own supply is limited."

"He's experienced enough to get some more. He has guns and fish-lines. I'll warrant he won't starve."

This in view of Ackroyd's hospitality seemed a very ungracious remark, and she made it clear that she was displeased.

"After all, he hasn't treated you with much consideration," he said. "Any decent man would have made some effort to see you safely home."

"He may have his own reasons," she objected.

"Undoubtedly."

"No more," she begged. "I hate talking about people behind their backs—and we are both indebted to him."

He was wise enough not to resume his castigations, and went on checking off the things he was taking with him. Ackroyd saw him on his way back from the wood-cutting. He cast an eye at the neat pile of gear, and then at the mule, which was grazing on some very rank grass.

"Packing?" he asked.

"Yes. I've got to make a start to-morrow. Ackroyd, can you help me out with food?"

"I guess I'll have to, but you'll have to go on short rations, or make up with your gun."

"Thanks! I'm used to short meals, and Helen——"

"Helen!" ejaculated Ackroyd sharply.

"I'll have to educate her in the ways of the wilderness."

"She won't be coming."

Sinclair gave a start at this utterly unexpected remark. He gazed at Ackroyd to see if he were joking, but found his face very serious.

"You must be mistaken," he said.

"Oh, no. I've made different plans for her."

"I see. And does she know about these—plans?"

"Not yet."

"It's rather a pity you left it so late."

"Why?"

"Well, isn't it possible she might prefer to stand by the present plans?"

"I don't think so."

He turned on his heel and strode away, leaving Sinclair staring into nothingness. While he was still endeavouring to get to the bottom of this change of mind Helen reappeared.

"Where's Garth?" she asked.

"Just gone into the hut. He has a little surprise for you."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not going to let you leave here—yet."

"Not going to let me—— What are you talking about?"

"I am merely telling you what he told me. I can't say I am very surprised."

"Why not?"

"His attitude to me all along. He resented my coming here. It upset his plans, I think."

Wasn't it inevitable that I should offer to put you in touch with your people ? ”

“ Of course. But you are not suggesting that Garth—— That is a monstrous idea.”

“ There's no need to get angry.”

“ I am going to see him.”

“ I certainly should.”

She marched into the hut, quite ready to do battle in defence of her liberty of choice. Ackroyd turned his head as she entered and saw her crimson cheeks and flashing eyes.

“ What's the matter now ? ” he asked.

“ Sinclair told me——” She fumbled with her words. “ He said you were not going to let me leave to-morrow.”

“ That is a crude way of putting it, but it comes to the same thing. I prefer that Sinclair leaves alone.”

“ How dare you attempt to interfere ? ”

“ Have you come to start a quarrel ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ All right then. Let's have it. Here's your cue—I am not going to let you leave with Sinclair. Is that clear ? ”

“ More than clear. And how do you propose to stop me ? ”

“ I really hadn't thought about it.”

“ Then you had better, for I intend to go.”

“ Good ! Now we know where we are. There are two excellent ways of stopping you. One is to refuse to part with any food, and the other is just to prevent you—with my two hands. Which do you prefer ? ”

She felt she hated him for playing his trump cards in that mean fashion. Both threats if carried out were effective obstacles. She was obliged to take another line of argument.

"From the very first you have bullied me, and tried to coerce me. You raised the excuse that it would interfere with your work to leave this place. When circumstances did not make it necessary for you to leave, you show up in your true colours. What is your object in trying to keep me here?"

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I am asking you that. I'm not a child, and there is a solution which is immediately apparent. Yet I find it difficult to believe you are that sort of man."

"What sort of man?" he demanded angrily. "God, do you imagine you are necessary to me—that I would perjure my soul——? Is that some foul idea put into your head by Sinclair? I don't want you here—not for a minute. I don't need you, nor any other damned snivelling woman, parading your sex——"

"You brute!" she gasped, and slapped his face.

She saw the crimson imprint of her hand, and wondered what he would do. But he did nothing but bite his lower lip.

"I deserved that," he said, after a pause, and to her extreme surprise. "But you have the knack of arousing the worst in me. The wrong words come and——"

"The right words—that express what you are thinking."

"No. Now listen. It will save a lot of words in the end. The reason why I don't want you to leave with Sinclair is that I reckon I am a better guide than he, and I want to take you myself."

"You've said that before. I'm tired of hearing it."

"This time I mean it."

"When?"

"Within three days."

"Three days. Is that a solemn promise?"

"Yes."

"You won't go back on it?"

"No."

"Have you only just come to that decision?"

"No. I always meant to get you away before the winter came. What do you say about it? Is it a bargain?"

She hesitated for the sake of appearances. Not for anything would she have had him know that his pilotship was infinitely preferable to that of Sinclair.

"All right," she said finally. "I'll wait for you."

"Good!"

"I think I had better tell Sinclair," she said.

"He imagines that we shall leave together."

"I have already told him you are not going."

"I know. But he will want my decision."

"He wants far too much," he grumbled.

"But have your own way."

Sinclair sneered when she made known her

decision, and then laughed in a way which irritated her immensely.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded.

"Your infantile credulity. You don't really believe he will keep his promise?"

"I do."

"You are amazing. You know as well as I do that he is tied here by gold. That comes first always. He is simply putting up this yarn to get me out of the way. Well, you're a woman, and old enough to know your way about."

"You are making the foulest imputations," she replied hotly. "If you repeat them again I will tell Garth."

"That would be interesting," he sneered. "But I don't see why you should burn me up with your eyes just because I draw a very natural conclusion from Ackroyd's strange behaviour. Can't we remain friends?"

"Of course, but please don't attempt to suggest things like that again."

"I won't," he promised.

On the following morning Sinclair made his departure. Ackroyd had treated him better than he deserved in the matter of food, and had refused payment for it. At the last Sinclair strove to be decent.

"I've been an encumbrance," he said. "I shan't forget that you made an excellent job of my leg."

"That's all right," replied Ackroyd. "I'd have done as much for a dog."

"Thanks!"

"I didn't mean it that way."

"That's all right. I'm not thin-skinned. Good-bye, Helen!"

"Damned cheek!" muttered Ackroyd. "Well, he's like the departure of a sick headache."

"Why do you hate him?" she asked.

"I don't hate him. It takes a pretty good creature to merit a man's hate. He's not worth it."

"I wonder why you dislike him so much," she persisted.

"You go on wondering," he replied. "But I'll tell you this much—men are pretty good judges of men, and when a man dislikes another man as much as I dislike him there is usually a pretty good reason for it."

She was compelled to laugh at his illogicality.

"Does that amuse you?" he asked.

"Yes. You forget his dislike for you. According to your argument he too must have a pretty good reason."

"Maybe he has," he grunted. "But I'm not worrying."

The place seemed singularly quiet without Sinclair, and somehow she felt that a disturbing influence had gone. Ackroyd became less wrapped up in himself. He talked more, and with less venom in his words. Then he reverted to the pending trip.

"It's going to be rough," he explained. "Without a beast of burden all the stuff we

need must be carried. Still you're harder than most women——"

"What makes you think that?"

"I've got eyes in my head. Besides, my medical experience is useful in that direction."

"You mean in summing me up the way they sum up prize cattle: so many pounds of flesh, length of arms, legs, and what not?"

"Well, that's necessary when you're dealing with physical facts."

"I hope I'm not all physical facts."

"No, you've a mind."

"Thanks! I thought perhaps you had overlooked that."

He looked at her fixedly.

"There are some things about you I can't overlook," he said. "Your eyes, your hair, the little dimple in your chin, and——"

"Go on," she said, amused, and not disinterested.

"And your tongue," he added.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XI

HELEN'S mind was now full of her impending departure. There was much that was pleasant in the thought of reaching home again. She was tired of the masculine garb she wore, and pined for the greater freedom that skirts provided. Living day after day, week after

week in one suit of clothing had become irksome. She would have given much for just one evening in a light and flimsy evening frock.

Men, it seemed, were different. Ackroyd never appeared to be dress-conscious. She doubted whether he knew what he was wearing at any moment. If he tore any part of his apparel she had to draw his attention to it before he was aware of it. The only inconsistent feature in his disregard for his personal appearance was the new habit of a daily shave. This he had kept up ever since he removed his beard, and she had to admit it was a striking improvement.

"Do you intend to come back here after you leave me?" she asked.

"Of course."

"I can't understand you."

"I don't ask you to. Do we ever succeed in fully understanding the other person?"

"Sometimes we do."

"I doubt it. You can only live one life—your own."

"But it's nice to be able to appreciate other people's motives."

"Is it?"

"Aren't you ever interested in other people?"

"That depends."

These terse rejoinders always annoyed her. It was a plain hint that he didn't want to engage in conversation. She went about the business of preparing a meal while he got together certain articles which would be needed for the trip.

While she worked she saw him turning out all the pockets of his various well-worn coats.

"Lost something?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Oh, never mind."

Some minutes later he came to her with an old envelope in his hand and a scowl on his face.

"Did Sinclair cut his hand just before he left?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe he did. I saw a bit of rag round one of his fingers. But why do you ask?"

His expression puzzled her. The mouth was tightly closed, and the muscles of his jaws moved visibly.

"The skunk!" he muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"He has stolen my map."

"But he had maps of his own—plenty of them."

"You don't understand. The map he was after was the one which gave the trail markings—the map lost by those two old prospectors. I see it all now. He lied about being in the Government Survey Department, and about his lost instruments. He is after the thing which I am after, and now he's got the key to it."

"But surely——"

"Yes," he cut in explosively, "I've seen him watching me at times. Look. I slipped the map into this foolscap envelope the last time I used it. Here's a smear of blood from his hand."

"But will it help him?"

"It may do. He may have other clues. Did he ever ask questions about me—and my object here?"

"Yes, but I gave him to understand you were digging for gold."

"He knew I wouldn't stay here all these years digging out a few ounces of gold-dust a week. Are you sure you didn't tell him what I told you?"

She gazed at him so hardly he turned his head away.

"All right," he muttered. "I guess he found it out by himself. But this makes all the difference."

"To what?"

"To my going away. I can't go now."

"What!"

"That's the long and short of it."

"You mean you are going to break your promise?"

"I've got to. For God's sake don't start chiding me. I was in earnest; see for yourself." He indicated the piled-up gear. "But I'm not going to let that fellow have a clear run. Can't you see how impossible it is?"

"I can only see that gold and revenge occupy the first place in your mind."

"Why not? What does it matter whether you go back to-morrow, next week, or——?"

"Or never?" she cut in.

"Be reasonable."

"I thought I was reasonable."

"You are not. Anyway, that's the position. I'm going after Sinclair."

"When?"

"Now. He can't have got far."

"And what about me?"

"You can stay here, or come with me, just as you like. But if you come I warn you it won't be a picnic."

There was nothing to do but accept the situation. Curiously enough, she was not so disappointed as she pretended to be. Opposed to the natural desire to put the mind of her father at ease was an ever-growing interest in this strange man. Moreover, she had a sneaking sympathy for him now. Sinclair had undoubtedly proved himself an ungrateful, lying scoundrel, and she was glad now that Ackroyd had intervened and prevented her from accepting the escort of such a man.

On the other hand, she deprecated the motive which lay behind Ackroyd's cancellation of his promise. It seemed such a pity that a man of his undoubted ability should allow his mind to be obsessed by the desire for revenge. At times the real man came uppermost in him—rose high above the accumulated poison that the years had distilled. It was this man which appealed to her, which aroused in her wild hopes. She believed it to be a duty laid upon her to help him put away unworthy resolutions, and this hitch in the programme while being disappointing on the one hand was helpful on the other.

"I've been thinking," he said, as he stuffed

a revolver into his holster. "You had better stay here."

"No, I want to come."

"Why?"

"To prevent you from doing something silly—something you might everlastingly regret."

"You mean shoot him?"

"If that isn't in your mind why take that weapon?"

"Because he is armed. I don't think I'll need it, but I'm not going to run the risk of having to put up my hands to him."

"You think he would fight?"

"A man's dead body might lie about a long time in a place like this," he replied, "short of it being eaten by some animal. I don't think a great deal of life, but, all the same, I'm not anxious to be made wolves' meat."

"All this is horrible."

"Who made it so?"

"Aren't you helping?"

"Don't start an argument. If your mind is made up, come right along."

"You're taking a tent?"

"Yes. It may take a day or two to find him."

"I'll carry that."

"It's too heavy. You take that small pack. I'll fix it for you."

It was an old rucksack, and was packed with food. He shortened the two shoulder-straps so that it fitted snugly into the middle of her back. The tent and the other paraphernalia he hoisted on to his broad back.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

They left the hut, after making sure that the fire was raked out and that there was no danger of a conflagration. Ackroyd turned into the path which Sinclair had taken. Here and there the hoof-marks of the mule could still be seen. He walked at a great pace with his head slightly forward and an aggressive expression on his face. The familiar scenes were soon left behind, and broken country entered. At one spot the path bifurcated. Here Ackroyd halted and made an investigation of the ground. Helen could see no sign of footprints, but his eyes were more experienced.

"The right fork," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I've got eyes."

"So have I, but I can see nothing."

"You would if you had lived in the forest as long as I have. The mule is slow. A bit lame, I think."

How he arrived at this was a mystery to her, but she knew it was useless to ask questions, with him in his present mood. In her heart she hoped he would not meet Sinclair. Nothing could be more appalling than to see these two men literally at grips. An hour or two later they came upon very loose earthy ground where the mule's hoofs could be seen quite clearly; also Sinclair's.

"He turned here," said Ackroyd, "almost doubled back on his tracks. I've been here

before, following the map markings. That's what he is doing. He's not made a bee-line for home. He's after what he isn't going to get."

A little later she saw quite plainly that what he said was true. They were never more than a few miles from the hut, and on one occasion they actually saw it in the distance. From here the trail-marks went out to the ledge beside the ravine where Sinclair had been found injured.

"Is he likely to find anything here?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've never explored beyond the ravine. The map markings weren't very clear. I was going farther afield on that day when you came with me and we found him."

"Where do we go now?"

"Left—along the ledge."

Half a mile farther up there were unmistakable signs of Sinclair and the mule. The animal had slithered down a very dangerous path, and it said much for the condition of Sinclair's half-mended leg that he could make the descent.

"Down there," said Ackroyd. "And take care!"

She made the descent cleverly, and at last stood in the rocky gully. Ackroyd was like a bloodhound here, for the accumulation of loose stones was baffling.

"Here, I think," he said. "No, he couldn't pass that boulder. Ah, here's a mark—and another. He's gone due west—towards the grotto."

They moved along the gully for a hundred

yards, and then Ackroyd saw a possible place to make the ascent, but on reflection he came to the conclusion that it was impossible for a mule.

"There must be a better place farther along," he said.

This was found after half an hour's foot-tiring trudge, and scratched boulders told Ackroyd as much as he needed to know.

"Up there," he said, pointing to the summit.

Helen finally stood at the top, breathing heavily. The comparatively light pack now felt like a ton weight. But Ackroyd, despite his enormous load, was still like a hound on the leash. He gave her a pitying look.

"I told you it would be heavy going."

"I'm not complaining," she protested.

"You are—with every inch of your face. Sit down a bit. He'll keep."

"No."

"Sit down!" he thundered.

While she resented his bullying tone, she was glad to snatch a brief respite. He pointed in the misty distance, where the mountains were massed together.

"The grotto is there. It'll take us two hours."

"But I thought you hadn't been there."

"I haven't. I've seen it from a distance. I reckoned it was off the map, so to speak, but now I am beginning to wonder."

"You think he may be there?"

"I know he came this way. Are you fit?"

"Yes."

They moved on again, through a magnificent

glade. Now they were treading on pine needles, now on hard rock. Ackroyd never took his eyes off the ground. He saw what she utterly failed to see—the apparently indelible footprints of man and beast.

“I think the forest life has turned you into an animal,” she said.

“What’s wrong with animals?” he grunted. “At least they don’t lie and cheat. With them it’s a straight issue—the survival of the fittest.”

“Yes, and that’s the very doctrine that civilisation is out to alter. Surely we have got beyond that?”

“You’ve only altered the rules of the game, not the game itself,” he grunted. “Don’t talk any more. That skunk may be anywhere in this neighbourhood. Creatures like him have good ears. The devil sees to that. Ssh!”

“I heard nothing,” she whispered.

“I thought I heard a mule’s bray, a long way off. But maybe it was fancy.”

Now they were in the bright sunshine, with the marvellous panorama of the mountains before them. Less than a mile away was the curious configuration of the grotto.

“Now keep dead quiet,” he whispered. “I’ve just seen a heel-mark. I don’t want to put him on the qui vive.”

They went forward, Ackroyd in front, and she close on his heels. As they neared the dark opening she became strangely excited. It seemed to her that important events were pending. That enormous breach in the rock was like a

grim challenge to adventurers. She would have liked to avoid it—to stay out in the marvellous sunshine. But Ackroyd had quite different ideas.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XII

THEY stood before the prodigious mouth of the grotto, both breathing hard from their heavy exertions. Ackroyd rested for a few moments and then examined the ground. She saw him moving from place to place and finally stop close to a stunted tree. From there he came back to her.

“He tethered the mule to that tree,” he whispered. “It looks to me as if he took it into the grotto afterwards. I can’t find any tracks leading away.”

“But why should he take the mule inside?”

“I don’t know, but there’s little doubt he did do so. You’ve got the candles in that rucksack. I shall need a couple.”

She found them, and he lighted them in the shelter of the rock. One he gave to her, and the other he retained. He was about to make a start when he changed his mind and began to rid himself of his heavy pack.

“I’ll cache this,” he explained, “and take over the rucksack. It will make the going easier for both of us.”

She was not sorry to be rid of the rucksack, for it was becoming rather an incubus. and there

was no knowing what kind of acrobatics the interior would call for.

"All right now," he said. "Keep close behind me, and keep the candle going."

For a distance of about fifty yards the grotto was fairly well lighted by daylight, but then it took a sudden turn to the left and illumination was restricted entirely to the two candles. She had been prepared for strange sights, but not so strange as those brought into view by the flickering flames. The grotto was immense, and in places its roof was so high as to be invisible. The floor for some distance was level, and obviously water-worn. Everywhere were fantastic shapes—pendulous masses of limestone and snaky stalactites.

In places stalactite and stalagmite had met, their union forming a waisted column which stretched from floor to ceiling. From other gleaming points water dripped with the regularity of a clock ticking, but much slower.

Ackroyd stopped and held the candle close to something embedded in the rock wall beside him. She looked and saw the shape of an animal skull.

"Sabre-toothed tiger—prehistoric," he said. "That would bring joy to the heart of any geologist. And here's another, even more perfect. Look at that column—more than a million years of geological history there."

"How do you know about these things?" she asked.

"How does anyone know about anything?"

he retorted. "Watch that candle. There's a draught here."

Where the wind came from was impossible to say, for the poor illumination revealed no kind of outlet. So far as they could see the vast tunnel went on interminably, and the farther it went the more eerie it became. Now their voices, even when whispering, seemed to boom, and there were strange recurring noises, the origin of which was not apparent.

"Ssh !"

Ackroyd's sibilant utterance sounded uncanny in that whispering gallery.

"What's the matter?" asked Helen.

"The mule again—here."

He was holding the candle low, and she saw hoof-marks on some soft earth. They were pointing in the direction in which they were going, and in the circumstances their existence was remarkable.

"Hold up your candle," whispered Ackroyd. "Let us see where we are."

The combined lights of the two candles revealed an almost cylindrical tunnel, the roof of which was about twenty-five feet above them. There was a complete absence of wind now, and the atmosphere was both damp and heavy. So far as could be seen the tunnel went on in a straight line.

"Weird place," said Ackroyd. "The air is not too good here."

This was proved by the dwindling flames of the candles. But another hundred yards of

progress brought about better conditions. Again the roof took a slant upwards, and the cavern widened appreciably. The comparatively flat floor now became broken, and awful chasms were seen. Opposite them there was a vast breach in the wall, which had the appearance of the opening to another tunnel. Helen pointed to this.

"We must examine it on the way back," said Ackroyd. "I don't think the mule could have got across at this point."

"You think Sinclair is still here?"

"He must be. Those tracks in the mud were made quite recently."

"Suppose—suppose we find him?"

He turned his head and she saw the candle flame reflected in his fierce eyes.

"If we find him he is going to hand over that plan."

"But he will deny he has it."

"There are ways of proving it," he said grimly.

She knew what this signified, and the prospect was not pleasant to contemplate. With both men armed anything might happen when tempers got out of control. To appeal to Ackroyd would be useless. His whole attitude was that of a man who was suffering from the burning sting of his guest's base ingratitude. Not all the logic in the world would have had the slightest effect upon him. Had Sinclair been ten men instead of one he would have gone on.

"Ssh!"

Again he stopped, head thrust forward and

slightly averted that his inclined ear might catch the slightest sound. From ahead of them came the unmistakable sound of ringing metal on rock. Ackroyd's expression changed to one of great joy.

"He's there, ahead of us," he whispered. "That is the mule's shoes on rock. Put out that light."

"Put out the light?" she gasped.

He blew it out for her, and then took off his hat and shielded his own candle with it, so that no light was shed beyond a certain point not many yards ahead.

"I want to take him by surprise," he whispered. "Be careful how you walk, and don't fall down one of those abysses. Another thing, don't talk."

She inclined her head, and he began to move forward at a great pace—so fast that it was with the utmost difficulty that she could keep up with him. The ground became more broken than ever. The centre part fell away into an abyss and the only traversable path surmounted these unknown depths, close to the rock wall. How the mule had managed to make the going was a mystery. Helen held her breath as she crept behind Ackroyd.

Her guide suddenly halted, and looking forward she saw the reason. The darkness was relieved by a faint glow which came from an illumination round the wide bend of the grotto. It meant that Sinclair was not far ahead.

"Got him!" muttered Ackroyd. "He can't

be fifty yards away. You'd better keep this side of the bend."

"Why?"

"Because he's liable to see me when I turn the corner,"

"But if——?"

"You do as you're told," he cut in. "He's not likely to offer me a warm welcome."

"Garth?"

"What?"

"Is it really worth it? I mean—if he should shoot——"

"If he does he may regret it. Wait for me here."

"I think you are mad——"

He did not wait to hear the end of her castigation, but went forward very hurriedly, still shielding the candle-flame. He was nearing the bend when the most amazing thing happened. She saw him slip and slither down an inclined slab of rock, and then disappear from view. It was now absolutely dark save for the faint light that came from round the bend of the grotto.

"Garth! Gar——!"

She cut short her despairing cry as she realised that Sinclair might overhear her, and take flight. The need to do something at once was obvious, but she remembered that Ackroyd had the matches, and without them illumination was impossible. Curious fears crowded in upon her. Normally she was not afraid of darkness, but this place was uncanny in the extreme. Pulling herself together, she threw off these stupid fears,

and began to move forward with the greatest caution. On her left was the deep abyss, down which she believed Ackroyd had fallen. It seemed to her that some vast magnet was drawing her down into it, and she wedged herself closer and closer to the wall on her right.

At last she reached the spot where she estimated Ackroyd had been when he disappeared from view. Her eyes had now grown more accustomed to the darkness, and the moving shadows on the bend helped visibility a trifle. On her left was a shelving slab of rock, wet from roof-drippings. It hovered above the black abyss, and in a small depression was a white object—Ackroyd's extinguished candle. Violent vertigo overtook her, and in speechless terror she gripped a spur of projecting rock.

Then that like her superstitious fear passed. She was trembling but mistress of herself. The candle was out of reach, but it proved one thing—she was on the site of the tragedy. Kneeling on the narrow ledge she craned her head downward.

“Garth!”

No sound came up from below.

“Garth!”

The dead silence caused her heart to thump. What conclusion was there but that he was lying at the bottom of that awful pit, stunned and helpless? Again and again she called, but always there came back that mocking echo—nothing else. Realising that she could do nothing alone, her mind turned to Sinclair. He would

probably have a length of rope—also matches and candles. Despite the friction that existed between him and Ackroyd he would not fail to respond to such a summons as this. Yes, Sinclair was the solution—presuming it was Sinclair.

Beyond this danger-point the path broadened out, and she was not long in turning the bend. From there she gazed down a straight gallery to the source of the light. It was shed by two candles, by the side of which was Sinclair and the mule. He was bending over something utterly absorbed.

“ Mr. Sinclair ! ”

Her voice sounded titanic in the confined space. Sinclair gave a visible start, and swung round. She guessed she was well-nigh invisible to him, and she saw him reach out for the rifle. To save time she hurried forward, and very soon was within twenty yards of him.

“ Helen ! ” he ejaculated. “ Alone ? ”

“ Yes. But there has been an accident. Garth has fallen into an abyss——”

“ Garth ? ”

“ Ackroyd. We came——”

She stopped as her gaze fell on two awful objects. They were two skeletons, propped against an enormous boulder. In close proximity to them was a sled and sundry gear. The significance of the two skeletons was clear enough : Sinclair had found what Ackroyd had been searching for for three years.

“ The two men I told you about,” said Sinclair. “ I guessed they died up here.”

She was about to rebuke him, but remembered Ackroyd's plight and decided to avoid friction for the time being.

"Come and help me," she begged. "We may be able to get him up."

"Was it at the bad spot—just round the bend?"

"Yes. He slipped and disappeared."

"Then there's nothing to be done. That abyss goes down hundreds of feet."

"But we can try. You have rope there."

"Less than sixty feet."

"How do you know it is so deep?"

"I do know."

"Are you suggesting we should do nothing? Have you forgotten that a few weeks ago you were in a similar plight? I can't believe you can be so devoid of human feeling as to——"

"All right, I'll come," he snapped.

He took the coil of rope from the mule, and also one of the lighted candles.

"Even if he were alive, there's no place to stand where one could haul him up. What's more, he would be broken to bits."

"Don't!" she begged.

They reached the place of the disaster, and the candle-light revealed a bottomless abyss, about ten feet wide. Sinclair leaned well over this and shouted, "Ackroyd, are you there?"

The last words of his own voice were flung back at him.

"Hello there! Hello!"

Only the persistent echo came. He turned to Helen, whose face had gone pallid.

"You see?"

"Surely—surely something can be done?"

"Can you suggest anything?"

She could not. So far as she could see, the sides of the abyss were almost vertical. If Ackroyd was at the bottom he was undoubtedly unconscious. Perhaps a man of more heroic make-up would have devised some means of getting down, but it was patent that Sinclair was not in the least enthusiastic—and there were good reasons why he should not be.

"It's horrible!" she said.

"Sure it is," he replied. "But that's life—full of the unexpected."

"Wait!" she said. "If you could lower me down——"

"What nonsense are you talking?"

"I could take the candle with me. I should be able to see to a greater depth——"

"I couldn't support your weight on this uneven ground. It would be suicide."

"I'm willing to risk it."

"Then I'm not," he snapped. "One accident is bad enough. Now be reasonable, and let's get along."

"No," she retorted. "To go and leave him like this is impossible. It may not be so deep as you imagine. Give me the candle."

"What are you going to do?"

"Merely lower it on the end of the rope, at the moment. Give it to me—please."

" It won't stay alight."

" It will if it is properly fixed."

" Very well, you can try."

She took the candle from him, and also the rope. To keep the candle in a vertical position she prised open some of the strands of the rope and pushed the end of the candle through them. It sagged a trifle but not sufficiently to ruin the experiment. Hand over hand she let the rope out. Down went the light between the two rock walls. Here and there crystalline substances gleamed like jewels, and in places water, white with limestone, trickled through the strata. Finally the knotted end of the rope was in her hand. Below was the tiny, flickering light, yielding a very local illumination. Beneath it was impenetrable blackness.

" What did I tell you ? " said Sinclair, leaning over the abyss.

" There's a ledge on this side."

" Yes, but bare. If he fell on that he would have broken every bone in his body."

" Don't ! " she begged.

" You must accept hard facts."

She was still staring down into the void, with every nerve strained. Sinclair gave a gesture of impatience.

" Wait ! " she said. " I believe I can hear water."

" The drippings from the rocks."

" No—a different sound as well. There, don't you hear that ? "

" Imagination."

"I tell you——"

"Oh, come," he interrupted. "This is getting on your nerves. If Ackroyd fell down here he is doomed. No power on earth could avail him. Even if there was an underground stream he could never hope to survive. We are simply wasting time."

"Wasting time!" she said bitterly. "You call it wasting time to try and save a man's life."

"I do, when it is so obvious we can do nothing."

"You never wanted to do anything from the start. You had to be dragged here."

"And what good have we achieved?"

She drew up the rope, and secured the guttering candle. Undoubtedly there were grounds for his remarks, but she hated him for the way he had voiced them. He took the candle and the rope from her trembling, numbed fingers, and lighted her way across the danger zone. In a few minutes they were back at the spot where she had found him.

THE ghastly skeletons, the sled, and the scattered gear brought Helen back to realities. Now she recognised the long, narrow sacks as those in which prospectors stored gold-dust—"pokes" as they were termed.

"So you found the gold?" she said, somewhat bitterly.

"Yes, I was lucky."

"Lucky! Do you imagine I do not know by what means you achieved this?"

"I don't get you exactly."

"You do. Why do you think Ackroyd came here to-day?"

"Probably for a pleasant excursion with you. What more could man desire. A nice dark grotto and a pretty woman——?"

"Stop that!" she retorted angrily. "You know he came to get back the map which you stole from his pocket. If he had met you there would have been trouble."

"There certainly would. Since you are so frank, let us get things clear. We were both after this stuff. I heard the story along the coast, and after making inquiries I believed there was some truth in it. I've spent a lot of time and money hunting for these two corpses—and the little legacy they left behind. Well, I've got it. Is that very terrible?"

"You got it by trickery and lies. You were never in the employ of the Government, and you never had an assistant——"

"Of course not," he laughed. "But do you imagine I am such a fool as to have gone to Ackroyd and told him exactly what my real object was? We were both playing pussy. What was he doing but pretending to be washing a little gold-dust out of mountain streams? That was eye-wash for my benefit—and yours."

"Not mine. He told me the truth."

"Oh, so you were in his confidence? Well, I rather guessed you were. But let's have done with it. Both our ends will now be served. You will be able to get home, and I shall be able to pay off quite a number of old bills."

"I don't want to come with you."

"Thank you! But can you suggest any alternative?"

It did not require a moment's thought for her to see that she was in his hands. Like him or not, he represented a link with civilisation. With Ackroyd gone life in his hut would be impossible. She believed she would go stark, raving mad if left alone there for month after month, even though there was food enough to keep her alive.

"What do you propose doing?" she asked.

"Get back to the hut and provision ourselves. There's scarcely enough food on the mule for one person. He wasn't very generous in that respect."

Her eyes flashed her resentment. She knew that he was mightily glad at the way things had turned out. Now he was free to help himself to whatever he fancied. His chief danger had been removed, and the rest was plain sailing.

"What are you going to do with those gruesome things?" she asked, indicating the skeletons.

"Leave them—and the gold too, for the time being. But I shall have to hide it until we can pick it up again."

She watched him carry the heavy pokes of gold to a pool of water and sink them in it. Then to her surprise he set the mule moving in the opposite direction to that from which she had come.

"Why are you going this way?" she asked.

"There's another exit. It's longer but better. That's why I brought the mule through—to get on to the home trail. But now there's no need to hurry. I want those other provisions."

On turning a bend Helen saw daylight in the distance. Sinclair extinguished the candle, and very soon they were standing outside the grotto, bathed by the setting sun. He evidently knew the locality quite well, and had no difficulty in finding the path back to the other end of the grotto. From there the path through the woods and across the ravine was followed. Darkness fell long before they reached the hut, and with it came stinging cold.

"Home again!" said Sinclair, with a laugh.

His inopportune frivolity cut her to the heart. He could make vulgar jests while poor Ackroyd —. Came a flood of very mixed emotions. Without Ackroyd the hut seemed desolate and uninviting. But the spirit of him seemed to linger there, in some strange manner. Harking back, she recalled many pleasant moments. They had not seemed pleasant at the time, but she blamed herself for that.

"Mighty near freezing in here," said Sinclair.

"Can you get that stove going while I attend to this wild animal of mine?"

While he was absent she got a fire lighted, the fierce draught of the stove quickly engendered warmth. A meal was prepared and they ate together—Sinclair with evident relish, Helen almost reluctantly.

"It looks mighty like snow outside," he said. "That would be the best thing that could happen."

"Why?"

"My trouble lies in getting all that weight of gold-dust to the coast. It isn't easy on the back of a mule. A good fall of snow would enable me to make use of the sled. It is in fairly good condition. The mule could haul it, and it would save us from breaking our backs with extra gear."

"I see."

He left the table and reappeared with a bottle.

"Brandy," he explained. "I found this in the wash-house. Your late host was well prepared for emergencies."

"It was medicinal," she said. "He never drank it."

"Well, we shan't need this sort of medicine. Pass your glass."

"No—thanks!"

"Don't be silly. It will do you good—brighten you up."

"I don't need any brightening up."

"Well, you look glum enough, despite the pleasant prospect."

"Pleasant prospect?"

"Isn't it a pleasant prospect to be going home?"

"Not in these circumstances."

"That's not very complimentary."

"It wasn't intended to be. I can't forget how you have behaved in this matter."

He watered down the half-glass of brandy, and then drank deeply and not very politely.

"Good stuff that," he said. "What about my behaviour? What do you find reprehensible in it?"

"Your methods of getting what you want. You robbed the man who nursed you back to health, and then made practically no attempt to rescue him from a death-trap."

"You can hurt with your tongue when you like, but a lot of it is due to ignorance. I couldn't do anything for Ackroyd. Had I been venture-some enough to have gone down into that abyss it would merely have resulted in two deaths instead of one. You couldn't have hauled me up."

"The mule could," she retorted.

He laughed at this suggestion.

"Any man crazy enough to trust that animal to do the right thing would deserve to come to a bad end," he added. "Oh, no—be reasonable about this. We did all we could."

"I suppose you have some ingenious excuse for stealing his map?" she said scathingly.

"The best possible. It was a question of the survival of the fittest—also the greater need. He liked this sort of life—you ought to know

that. For three years he has lived up here alone. It wouldn't have hurt him much to have stayed another three years. He was that sort of man. I'm different. My last cent went to provision this trip, and six months of this lonely existence is about all I can stand. If I had gone back empty-handed I should have been completely on the rocks. Fortunately things have turned out differently."

"You have no conscience at all?"

"Well, yes, a little. I would rather have located the gold without being indebted to Ackroyd——"

"Indebted!" She laughed hoarsely.

"Don't do that!" he snapped.

"I can't help it. You take yourself so seriously—as if it mattered two pins whether you existed or not."

"It matters to me," he retorted. "And that is as much as I care about it. And what about you—you've got a cheek to browbeat me when your safety lies absolutely in my hands."

"I wonder if it does?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we make a lot of noise about our free will, but sometimes it seems as if there was a kind of destiny at work, which shapes things to its desires whether we like it or no. If I didn't feel that very deeply I should prefer to stay here and take my chance of meeting an honest man."

"Men like dear Garth?" he sneered.

She preferred not to respond to this. It was

sufficient that she had left no doubt in his mind as to her opinion of him. That seemed to meet the needs of the moment. He made another onslaught at the brandy, and then to her relief put the bottle away.

"Now for food," he said. "Let's see what sort of supply there is."

"You think we ought——?"

"Think! A fine chance we should have of winning through without more provisions. You know where the stuff is stored. Let us make a tally of it. What are you hesitating about?"

"It doesn't seem right."

He made a noise signifying his impatience, and started on the job alone. Very soon he had the food-supply tabulated. Ackroyd, like a prudent man, had laid in all sorts of reserves against the winter, and Sinclair nodded his head approvingly as he ran over them.

"Quite a connoisseur," he remarked. "Canned lobster even, and mock turtle soup. We'll take that sack of flour, those beans, and this, and this. The coffee seems a bit short, but there's enough tea to supply a regiment."

"Isn't there one thing you've forgotten?" she asked.

"Yes—canned milk."

"I was thinking about him—his people. They must be found and told about him. There are his effects—some gold-dust in that cupboard, and all the oddments——"

"Can't lumber myself up with them this trip. The best thing we can do is lock up the place,

as it is. But how are you going to find out who he is—where he came from ? ”

“ There may be letters—documents.”

“ Ah, his clothing. You’d better look through it.”

She nodded, but experienced a deep repugnance. Later, when Sinclair had gone outside, she undertook the melancholy task. But neither the clothing nor the chest of drawers which he had used for his personal belongings yielded anything in the nature of a clue to his relatives. Sinclair came in with his shoulders white.

“ Snowing,” he said. “ That’s fine. Did you find any letters ? ”

“ Nothing.”

“ H’m ! A queer fellow ! ”

“ Do you propose to leave in the morning ? ” she asked.

“ Yes. If the snow is deep enough we’ll take the grub down to the sled, and I’ll fix up some harness. We’ll save days this way. Our luck is in.”

His smug self-satisfaction sickened her, and the desire to get away from him while there was a chance sent her to an early bed. Sleep was not the blissful unconsciousness it should have been, for it was thronged with awful nightmares, in which Ackroyd figured. But at last came morning—a very reluctant dawn that never seemed to break thoroughly. The cause of it was clear when she stared through the small window. Winter had come at last. The pines were heavily draped with snow, and the whole

landscape seemed completely different. It was snowing still—the dense small flakes of the higher altitudes blanking out everything outside a radius of about a hundred yards. When she saw Sinclair he had changed his mind about leaving.

“ I’ve been outside,” he said. “ There’s a lot of wind across the valley—half a blizzard. When the snow’s all down the wind will give over. We’ll have to wait a bit.”

By noon the conditions improved. The snow ceased and the sky cleared. Out came the sun, flooding the whole marvellous landscape in manner miraculous. The unearthly beauty of it caused Helen to draw in her breath noisily.

“ Mighty impressive, isn’t it ? ” said Sinclair.

She wished he had not commented, for his very voice introduced disharmony into the scheme of things.

“ Are you making a start now ? ” she asked.

“ Sure ! Better get that parka of Ackroyd’s and the fur cap. You’ll need more covering than you’ve now got.”

She donned the garment, which fitted her nowhere. But there was a pleasant warmth associated with it. Sinclair too, had taken a short fur coat which he had found in the hut. His last parcel was a sack of horse-fodder.

“ Just about enough to see us over the mountains,” he said. “ There won’t be any grazing for two hundred miles.”

“ What about tents ? ” she asked.

"There's one in the grotto, with the other gear."

"One? We shall need two."

"Sure! I had forgotten. Where is the one Ackroyd used outside?"

"We took it with us when we went to look for you. I can show you where it is hidden."

"Good! We'll pick it up *en route*. Ready now?"

"Yes," she replied hoarsely.

"This way. Oh, did I pack those snow-shoes?"

"Yes—there."

He saw the ends of the shoes projecting from under the many packs, and then set the mule moving forward. Helen's heart ached as the pines soon enclosed them. She looked back once and saw the small shack between the trees. A sudden impulse came to run back to it and forsake this uninviting journey. But common sense prevailed. She was needed elsewhere. Garth Ackroyd had never needed her. Her presence in that place had been a complete waste of time. Now he had gone, and the only thing left of him was a bundle of vivid memories.

THE journey to the grotto was eventually accomplished. Helen succeeded in finding the gear which Ackroyd had cached, and

this was added to that which Sinclair already possessed. Again they made the eerie passage of the stalactites, and finally reached the gruesome spot where the skeletons lay. Here Sinclair retrieved his treasure from the pool and stowed it aboard the sled. The contraption was commodious enough to carry all the rest of the gear, and harness was improvised from some rope.

"That ought to do," mused Sinclair. "Let's be moving."

"What about the skeletons? Aren't you going to bury them?"

"What good would that do?"

"I don't know, but it only seems right."

"It's all hard rock here, and I haven't room for them on the sled. Come, it's no time for sentiment."

It was as much as the sturdy mule could do to haul the heavy weight over the rough ground, but the distance to the exit of the grotto was small, and once the sled-runners encountered the dry, powdery snow progress was fast.

"That's better," said Sinclair. "Now for our bearings. I'm making due west. It'll be rough going for about three days, but then I hope to hit a main trail which will cut clean to the railroad. See?"

He indicated their position on the map which he had stolen, and she winced as she recognised it. But further recriminations were a waste of breath, and she merely nodded her approval. Their course lay across trackless country, the

successful negotiating of which called for considerable skill, since the sun was veiled and snow obliterated what paths there might have been. Only the contour markings on the map remained to assist Sinclair.

"If you made a mistake," he said, "you might wander round here all winter."

"You think that is not likely to happen?"

"I'll take good care it doesn't. I've been taught to use my eyes. It isn't the first time I've been caught in wild country. I've done a lot of roaming."

The mule did not take kindly to his new task, and a good deal of punishment had to be inflicted to compel him to keep the steady pace. These constant beatings finally aroused Helen's resentment.

"Can't you treat him a little more kindly?" she expostulated.

"I could, but he wouldn't appreciate it. If I let him go his own way we shouldn't make five miles a day. There—look at him now!"

The sled had stuck fast in a deep hollow, and the mule, after making one futile effort to get clear, went on strike. Sinclair reached out for the whip.

"Don't!" she begged.

"Oh, cut all that humanitarian stuff!" he retorted sharply. "Allow me to know my job. You could talk logic to that beast until your voice gave out. This is all he understands."

The whip came down on the animal's bony haunches. His ears went back savagely, and

then he hauled nobly, and dragged the load on to level ground.

"There's the proof," said Sinclair triumphantly.

Progress was resumed in a world of virgin whiteness, with a myriad snowflakes dancing in the cold dry air. There was a feeling of unreality about it all, and a silence that was awe-inspiring. In one wide valley the snow deepened considerably, and in its fresh, unfrozen condition boots went through it, rendering each step a great effort.

"We shall have to get into those snow-shoes," grunted Sinclair. "Damned uncomfortable things."

It was not her first experience of walking in snow-shoes, but hitherto such journeys had been restricted to a few hundred yards, and then over practically flat ground. The present conditions were very different, and within half an hour she loathed and detested the cumbersome things.

"I'd rather walk in my boots," she protested.

"You couldn't make half a mile an hour here. There's eighteen inches of the stuff. You're cramping yourself. Walk more like this. Watch me."

He demonstrated for her edification, and she profited by it to some extent. For three long hours this difficult method of progression was maintained, and then the depth of the snow decreased and she was able to rid her aching feet of the encumbering things.

"Time for a meal," said Sinclair. "We'll eat as soon as we find a convenient place."

A halt was subsequently made in a ring of snow-draped pines. For cooking purposes Sinclair carried a Primus stove. There was running water close by, and this saved the time which would have been taken up by melting down snow, as would have been necessary were winter further advanced.

"Get that kettle boiling first," he said, "I'll hunt up something to eat. You'll have to keep pumping, if you want to maintain good heat."

"I know."

"Oh, you do?"

"Do you imagine you are the only person on earth who has used a Primus stove?"

"Well, I can boil that kettle in six minutes. Beat that if you can."

By the time he had hunted out food to his liking she had the water boiling, and some coffee in process of being made. He nodded his approval, and placed a heaped-up frying-pan on the stove. It contained beans, canned pork, tomatoes, and what not—all mixed together; but when frying commenced the effect on enormous appetites was pleasant enough.

While the snow drifted down endlessly they ate and drank. The mule too did his best with his fodder ration. It was the briefest possible halt, and very soon they were moving again through the silent forests, where the snow lay unspotted. Evening brought a change in the conditions. The sky cleared magically and the

golden bars of the setting sun lay full across the western horizon. The whole wide landscape became transformed. An unearthly beauty lay upon everything for a few rare minutes, and then came the creeping shadows and the inevitable night.

With the departure of the sun and the clearing sky the cold struck down like a knife. Above them were the frosty stars, bright and aloof, and already the snow crackled under their feet. The mule, after being urged on hour after hour, was approaching a state of incurable rebellion.

"We must make camp," said Sinclair. "And we'll need a fire, or we shall freeze."

The best spot was chosen, and the sled unpacked. The business of getting the tents rigged up was tiring and prolonged, because of the rocky nature of the ground. But at last it was done. Sinclair hacked at the smaller branches of pine-trees, and soon had enough fuel to last until morning. Some precious paraffin had to be used in order to get the fire going, but after a while it burnt fiercely and threw a warm glow over the camp.

It was inevitable that darkness should bring sombre reflections in the circumstances. To Helen this kind of existence was absolutely novel. Perhaps in different circumstances she would have enjoyed it, but that was impossible when she remembered what had taken place so recently. In addition there were dangers of various kinds, and these were not entirely confined to the journey itself. There was Sinclair, a man of

unknown depths. It was discomfiting to observe the change in him since his lucky discovery, and the absence of Ackroyd. She could not fail to realise his conceited cocksureness, for it was manifested every few minutes. He had got what he wanted, and was presumably certain about his ability to win through to civilisation. When he talked to her it was in tones which one commonly employs towards an inferior creature. True, Ackroyd had also chose to belittle her sex, but he never aroused in her more than a feeling of impatience. Sinclair was a horse of another colour—an animal who required far more watching.

"Thank God for a fire!" he said, when at last they were able to sit by it and thaw their limbs. "My regards to the ghost of the old savage who first discovered fire. It would be hell without it. Good coffee this! Where did you learn to make it?"

"Is there anything remarkable in a woman being able to make a jug of coffee?"

"Well, no; but you have made it just how I like it."

"That was an accident," she replied tartly; "for I had no idea how you liked it."

"Why so crusty?" he asked.

"So what?"

"Rattled. You've hardly said two words all day."

"What did you expect me to say?"

"Well, conversation's a welcome feature in these sort of circumstances."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But there are a whole lot of reasons why I can't converse with any freedom."

"I should have thought you would be glad to be just one short step nearer home."

"I am, but I don't see how that affects the issue."

"What issue? What is there involved?"

"Just feelings—sensitivity. You should know what I mean without any elucidation on my part."

"You're a little sore because I wasn't willing to fling away my life uselessly, or to allow you to do so?"

"It is motives that count."

"You think that excuse isn't the right one?"

"Since you ask me, I am sure it isn't. The retention of the gold-dust was of vastly more importance to you than the welfare of Ackroyd."

"You're quite wrong. Why do you take that view of me?"

"I can't help it. You yourself have given me the lead. But please don't talk about it any more. I had no option but to travel with you, and it won't help matters to start any bickering."

"It certainly won't, but I think you might be a little more appreciative."

She made no response to this, for it was so obvious he was entirely unrepentant. He finished his meal before she did, and then went to attend to the mule. She came to the conclusion that his care for that animal was not altruistic. The several hundredweights of skin and bone represented a life-line. If it failed to survive,

good-bye to the chance of getting the gold-dust home that season.

"Another ungrateful creature," he grumbled. "Did you see him show his teeth at me? It's a hard, hard world!"

It was this sort of facetiousness which annoyed her most. She saw him later counting out the pokes of gold-dust, and weighing them in his hands. Then he did some mental arithmetic.

"Gosh! those fellows did well," he remarked. "I calculate this stuff will work out somewhere near forty thousand dollars. Good luck to them."

"You haven't got it home yet," she replied, unable to resist the temptation to hit back at him.

"No, and you're hoping I won't," he retorted. "But I forgive you because you are the victim of wounded emotions."

"What do you mean?"

"Ackroyd. You loved that——"

"What!"

"You needn't look at me so murderously. I'm a pretty good judge of human nature—and women. He treated you like so much dirt, and you pretended to despise him, more or less, but all the time you were in love with him."

"That's not true," she gasped. "But, even if it were, what business is it of yours?"

"None at all. It is simply an observation on my part."

"I wish you wouldn't make observations that are personal to the extent of being insulting."

"There you go again. Lord, what a little spitfire you can be! Have a drink and be friendly."

He produced the unfinished bottle of brandy which he had found at the hut, but she declined it with a disgusted shake of her head. He laughed and poured out half a mugful.

"Here's to your bright eyes!"

She scowled at him across the fire, and wished she could bring home to him the full contempt in which she now held him. But all her castigations were like water on a duck's back. He appeared to be more amused than hurt.

"Ah!" he said, as he quaffed the neat spirit. "To the second man who invented fire—of a liquid nature."

"I should have thought you would have found it advisable to keep sober," she remarked.

"I find it absolutely necessary—since the supply of firewater is inadequate," he retorted. "If I had half a case of the stuff I might find it convenient to make no rash promises. Look at the stars. They're marvellous."

Involuntarily she turned her gaze upwards, and was awed by a sight of the constellations. So near they seemed that she felt she could drag one of them down to earth. But for the presence of the man, the religious side of her nature might have been deeply touched, for the surroundings were such as to induce mystical phenomena, but he was a disturbing element in that universe.

"I'm going to turn in," she said shortly.

"What—at this hour?"

"Yes. I'm tired."

"It looks as if I'm going to enjoy a very pleasant social evening," he grumbled, "talking to myself."

"Well, you'll have at least one interested listener," she shot back.

"Thank you, Madam!" he said in mock seriousness. "If there is anything you need, just ring for it."

She entered the tent and gazed down at her rough bed. It was nothing more than some blankets and rugs, over a waterproof ground-sheet spread out on the snow. By the side of it was a candle stuck in a bottle, and the centre-pole carried a hook on which to hang anything she wished to discard in the way of clothing. All she dared discard were her boots and the fur coat.

Even at that short distance from the fire there was a bite in the air, and she guessed that before morning the cold would be intense. With a party of decent men and women there might have been excitement enough, but now she felt very disconsolate and apprehensive.

Huddled up between the blankets, with every available piece of warm material piled on top of her, she could see the shadows cast by the camp-fire playing on the thin canvas. Constantly changing patterns were woven, and at the same time her mind was also weaving thoughts—and fears.

THE morning sun stole through the pine-woods. A myriad frosty jewels gleamed and glistened. The fire had long since gone out, and the melted snow in its near vicinity was now blue ice. Helen peeped through the flap of her tent and saw Sinclair hacking away at a pine-tree with the small hatchet, his breath rising like smoke in the still, cold air. It was such a morning as baffled imagination: a stark, frozen landscape, clad in virginal whiteness, and illumined by heaven itself; the gem-bespangled snows; cascades of sparkling diamonds from the overladen branches of the conifers at every blow from Sinclair's hatchet. One wanted to cry out with delight, and yet remained silent.

By the time she emerged from the tent Sinclair had got the fire blazing and was opening more tins of food. He turned his head and bade her "Good morning," to which greeting she vouchsafed a very short reply.

"Twenty below zero," he said. "I can't break the ice in the creek. We'll have to melt down snow. Fill that pot."

Physical movements were necessarily rapid. To loiter over any task was to pay tribute to the cold. But in a very short time Helen felt the warm blood singing through her veins. The breakfast that followed was welcome and good. She had to admit that Sinclair was at least an efficient camper.

"We'll make better going to-day," he said.
"It won't snow for a bit."

"How do you know?"

"I don't, but I'm willing to bet on it."

"How is the mule?"

"Cursing his luck in his own fashion. It's a good job I piled that stuff on him. He's hard, but not used to roughing it in this way. I want to get moving quickly. Give me a hand with the tents."

Within half an hour their camp-fire was out of sight. Again the route led through thick timber—mile after mile of it, with exactly the same characteristics. Through these glades there were many possible paths, and only when there was a considerable fall in the elevation, or half a mountain to climb, was Sinclair able to check up.

"This is one of the worst stretches," he confessed. "It's like this for fifty miles, with nothing to guide a fellow. Provided I strike the river at the end of it, the rest is comparatively easy going."

"And if you don't?"

"I've got to keep trying until I do."

"But is there no habitation in this district?"

"Only a trading-post, on the river, and an Indian reservation forty miles to the west."

"Do we pass the trading-post?"

"No. It would add twenty miles to our journey."

"But wouldn't it be advisable?"

"I don't see that it would," he replied, with

a note of suspicion in his voice. "How would it benefit us?"

"The mule might make better progress without the gold-dust."

"Are you suggesting I should leave it there?"

"It would be safe, wouldn't it?"

"I wouldn't care to risk it. No, it goes with me."

"But we might be able to hire a team of dogs there."

He scoffed at the suggestion.

"A Swede, named Jansen, and his son and daughter, run the post. They haven't any dogs, and are snowed up all winter. You've got to be patient."

She realised he was adamant, and that it would be waste of breath to argue with him. As with Ackroyd, the gold was his first and last consideration. He was reluctant to meet anyone, because awkward questions might be asked, and she had little doubt that he would avoid any civilised spot in his crazy lust for the yellow dust.

That night, when they camped, she saw him again counting the pokes, as if there was a risk of them disappearing into the blue. He even opened one of them and played with the contents, until meeting her scornful eyes he replaced it and tied up the poke.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he demanded.

"Like what?"

"You know what I mean."

"Perhaps I do. I was wondering how many

men had thrown away their manhood, their pride, in the quest for easy money."

"You call it easy—six months of wandering alone in these damned mountains?"

"It was easy all the same, wasn't it?"

"We'll call it luck."

"Yes—bad luck. You'll get no joy from it. Money that comes so easy goes just as easily."

"Hark at our little moralist!" he jeered. "Now let me tell you something. I'm going to have the time of my life with this. On three different occasions I have been near handling a good sum of money, and something has always turned up to prevent it. Well, this time there's going to be no accident. I'm going to invest it in bricks and mortar—a hotel on the coast. And there I'll laze away the rest of my life—and make more money at the same time."

"I hope your dream will come true," she replied.

The remark had the effect of enraging him. He rose from the sack on which he had been sitting and marched up and down by the fire, with both hands stuck in his pockets.

"Of all the ungrateful creatures on God's earth you are the worst!" he stormed. "I put myself to a hell of a lot of inconvenience in bringing you along, and all the time you are hurling abuse at me, putting me in the dock, laying curses on me. What's the idea? Why can't you behave like a human creature?"

"Why can't you?"

He swung round on her with his eyes burning.

"The quicker you realise your position the better. We're here—just you and I—miles away from any other human being. You're attractive—too damned attractive for my liking. If I had a mind to be the sort of man you think I am, Heaven help you."

"That remark proves you are just that sort of man," she retorted, "for no decent man would have made it."

"Thanks!" he grunted. "I'll remember that."

"I hope you will. Now the fire is going out."

"Let it," he fumed.

She looked round and found the small hatchet. The replenishment of the wood fuel was a sheer necessity, for the great cold was increasing as the evening passed. She seized the hatchet, buttoned up her coat, and moved away.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To cut some wood. If you want to freeze during the night I don't.

He came across and took the implement from her.

"I'll get it. It will be a relief to get away from your tongue. You madden me at times."

She went back to the dying fire, and watched him moving about in the gloaming. There were no suitable branches on the trees in his near vicinity, and he wandered through the stark tall trunks until he was lost to view. A few minutes passed, and then she heard the sound of the hatchet being used.

More and more she was growing apprehensive,

though she was resolved not to display it. It seemed to her to be the best policy to arouse his anger, rather than his passions. What he had said was true enough, and not to admit it was folly. In such circumstances no woman of great physical appeal could ever feel safe with a man other than a trusted friend, or a saint—and Sinclair was neither of these. During the few days that had passed her fear of the future had increased, and there were yet weeks to go.

While her mind was occupied with this problem there came a slight noise from her rear. It was the crunching of snow—too loud to be made by any animal with the possible exception of a grizzly bear. She rose to her feet and stared into the darkness. Again came the sound—nearer and nearer. Sinclair's rifle was lying in the sled behind her. She took it up and waited anxiously. Then the most amazing thing happened. A man suddenly came to view. He stumbled, rather than walked, into the fitful firelight. Projecting from under his fur cap was a bandage stained with blood. He stopped and gazed at her.

"Garth!" she ejaculated.

He came closer, and his eyes swept the camp. His gaze rested on the sled, where the many pokes of gold were exposed.

"So—he got them?" he grunted.

"Yes, but I thought you were dead. How did you get here? How did you——?"

"Where is Sinclair?"

"Cutting wood. You can hear him."

" Good ! "

His frightful expression terrified her. Overjoyed as she was at this astonishing resurrection, his presence there was unwished-for. He loosened the small pack which he carried and straightened himself up with an effort.

" I've been going for twenty hours," he muttered. " But it was worth it."

" What—what are you going to do ? "

" Do. Take what is mine—this gear, the food, and that gold-dust."

" But it will mean——"

" Whatever it means I am taking it. I'll make a start now."

He commenced to pack some of the gear into the sled, and she watched him for a few moments. Then she was aware that the sound of chopping had ceased. It meant that Sinclair had gathered all the wood he required and was on his way back.

" Wait ! " she cried. " He is coming. Garth, don't do anything rash. Talk this over with him."

" Talk ! Do you think I have nothing better to do than talk to a skunk like that. The mule is his, and he is welcome to it. I'll let him have some food too—enough for you if you still prefer his company."

" So you think that ? " she retorted.

" Wal, it looks like it."

" Don't you realise that I had no alternative. I had to come with him or stay up there and starve."

" You can decide now."

" I'll come with you, but I want to prevent a quarrel. Isn't there any way—— ? "

" That's for Sinclair to decide."

" But he won't let you take the gold-dust."

" He'll have to do something big to stop me."

" He'll fight, and I dread to think what the end will be. Isn't it possible to come to terms ? "

" Terms ? "

" A share-out on a fifty-fifty basis."

He laughed scornfully at the suggestion.

" I don't make terms with a dirty crook. He got this stuff by robbing me, after I had saved his worthless life. Most men would shoot him at sight, but I'll still give him a chance to take away a whole skin."

" But you are injured, and——"

She stopped dead as Sinclair suddenly came to view. He was carrying wood in his two arms, and at the sight of Ackroyd he halted and disposed of his burden. Then he came forward stealthily, until he was within speaking distance.

" So it's you, Ackroyd ? "

" Sure ! I've come to collect a few things that were taken in my absence. Any objection ? "

" What things ? "

" You ought to know. All the things that belong to me."

" Including Helen, I presume," snarled Sinclair.

" Yes, including her—and the sled and the gold-dust."

The fire gave a spasmodic flicker and illuminated the face of Sinclair. It was tense and hateful.

"That gold belongs to me," he said. "Take what else you want, but keep your hands off that."

Ackroyd's response was to commence to stack the pokes of gold-dust more conveniently, but his glance never left the other man. Suddenly Sinclair slipped a hand down his hip and produced a revolver.

"Look out!" shrieked Helen.

Ackroyd dropped flat behind the sled as Sinclair's weapon went off with a reverberating noise. Before Ackroyd could return the shot Sinclair had placed the trunk of a stout pine-tree between them.

"Better get into the tent," growled Ackroyd.

"There's going to be a little trouble."

"No—wait! This can be settled——"

"The tent, or you may get hit. You're right in the line of fire. Hurry!"

She realised she was helpless, and that to stay there was only putting Ackroyd at a disadvantage. With tremulous heart she hurried away from the scene of conflict, praying that something would happen to prevent a hideous drama.

A NERVE-RACKING silence followed Sinclair's challenging shot. Reluctant as she was to witness so mad an affray, Helen could not bring herself to shut it out by closing the flap of the tent. She saw Ackroyd shielding his body with the sled, and waiting for an opportunity. But his adversary never showed an inch of his person. It looked as if he had slunk away, but a few minutes later Helen saw him cross to another tree, and then another, taking advantage of the increasing darkness caused by the dying fire.

She wondered if Ackroyd was aware of these strategical movements, and whether she should cry out and warn him. At the same time she could not think what Sinclair would gain by it, unless he was successful in taking Ackroyd in the rear unexpectedly. But this did not appear to be his motive, for he was moving in the wrong direction.

The truth came to her a few moments later. Between the tent and the fire lay the rifle which she had put down when Ackroyd arrived. Sinclair was making towards it. Armed with that he would be at a tremendous advantage. She resolved at all costs to prevent so mean a trick from being successful, and ran towards the rifle. At the same moment Sinclair left his cover. Ackroyd was now alive to his purpose, but dared not use the revolver, for Helen was directly in the line of fire.

She reached the rifle and picked it up. Close behind her came Sinclair, breathing heavily. She tried to fling the weapon towards Ackroyd, but Sinclair's outstretched arm prevented her. There was a fierce struggle, during which she clung on to the weapon with all her physical strength. Ackroyd rose from behind the sled.

"Let up!" he roared.

Sinclair swung the body of the girl round to cover his own. The barrel of the rifle was forced down into the snow. Realising the danger from Ackroyd, Sinclair gave Helen a violent push backwards. She fell heavily, and the next moment he was in possession of the deadly rifle.

"Got you!" he muttered. "By G——!"

Ackroyd brought his weapon to the horizontal, but before he could fire it the rifle went off with a strange sound. Helen uttered a cry of horror, and was then aware that Ackroyd was still on his feet and that Sinclair was lying still in the snow. She rose and ran forward.

"You—you shot him?" she gasped.

"No. I call that Providence."

"What do you mean?"

"Look!"

He pointed to the fallen rifle. The barrel was twisted and split and the breach was blown clean away.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It burst. The barrel must have got plugged with snow and earth during that brief struggle. The breach burst in his face."

"Oh, horrible! But is he dead?"

"I think so. Give that fire a poke, while I have a look."

She did as she was bid, and when she turned to look at Sinclair, Ackroyd had already covered him with a blanket from the sled. He nodded his head.

"Not a nice sight," he added. "I must—I must——"

He stopped and felt his way to the end of the sled, where he sat holding his head in silence. She saw that something was wrong and went to him.

"Please go away," he said. "I shall be all right——"

"But your hands——!"

He removed one of them and found that it was covered with blood. At the same time she perceived the dripping bandage on his forehead.

"You were injured in that fall in the grotto?"

"Yes. Guess I must have overdone things a bit in my hurry to find him. But I'll be all right——"

His voice tailed off and he sank back. Horrified, she went to the pot in which they had boiled some water for the coffee. There was still a quantity left, lukewarm. A new bandage was essential, but where to obtain it she did not know. Her own undergarment solved the problem. From it she tore two long strips, one of which to use as a swab. Followed the unpleasant task of disclosing the wound and bathing it. It was a deep cut over the left temple, and it was bleeding copiously. It was obvious that the old

bandage had been strained and had pulled the wound apart. Since the cut was vertical there was a chance that a new bandage would hold the edges of the flesh together and prevent serious loss of blood. Methodically she went about her task, and in due course completed it. He was still unconscious, but she was unable to tell whether it was due to loss of blood or sheer exhaustion.

She remembered the brandy, and wondered whether Sinclair had drunk it all. But on examining the bottle she found an inch or so left in the bottom. Pouring this into a cup she applied it to his lips. His eyes opened at last and blinked at her.

"Keep still," she begged.

"You here! But how—— Oh, I remember. What the devil am I doing——"

"You fainted."

"What!"

"You have lost a lot of blood."

"Fainted! Well of all the——"

"Please sit still."

He put his hands to his head, and was soon aware of the presence of new bandages.

"You've been busy apparently while I played the silly goat?"

"I tried to stop the bleeding, but I shan't succeed unless you lie quiet."

His gaze went to the covered corpse, and he frowned.

"I've got to deal with—that."

"Not yet. In the morning."

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Guess I'll try to get into one of those tents. A few hours' sleep will put me right."

Despite her protests he rose and walked unsteadily to the tent which Sinclair had intended to occupy. There he sank down, exhausted, and after covering him with all the available blankets and rugs she left him.

His condition troubled her, and she wondered what the next step would be. Unless he showed considerable improvement the following morning it would be impossible to go on. She suspected fever, but had no means of testing it.

Added to her anxiety was the horror of the evening tragedy. It was difficult to believe that Sinclair was dead, but it needed but one glance at the blanketed form to drive home the truth. As Ackroyd had said, it looked very much like Providence. But for the amazing accident the position would have been very different. How Ackroyd had contrived to escape from the abyss needed explaining, but at the moment more important things were in the balance.

She slept badly, and in the early hours of the morning she crept out to have a look at him. He was muttering to himself, and tossing about. Her worst suspicions were thus borne out. Towards dawn she managed to get to sleep, and did not waken until the sun was well above the horizon. She slipped on the parka and went across to the tent where Ackroyd lay. *En route* she suffered a great surprise—the blanketed form was no longer there !

The first thought that came to her mind was wolves. But she banished this explanation at once. At least the blanket would have been left. There was but one possible solution—Ackroyd had disposed of it. Yet that seemed incredible in the circumstances. She rapped on the side of the tent.

“ Hello, Garth ! ”

“ Come in.”

He was still lying down, with his face flushed ; but the bandage was still tight and white. She knelt down by the side of him.

“ How are you feeling ? ”

“ Not so bad,” he lied. “ It’s my temperature. I can’t get it down. Ugh ! It’s cold ! ”

She drew the blanket over him again.

“ Did you go out ? ” she demanded.

“ Only for a few minutes.”

“ Why did you do that ? ” she asked angrily.

“ Wal, that wasn’t a nice sort of job for any woman. I planted him fifty yards away. It didn’t take long.”

“ What are we going to do now ? ” she asked.

“ There’s nothing to be done but wait.”

“ Isn’t there a trading-post about thirty miles west ? ”

“ There was, but it may be closed down.”

“ I’ve got to get you somewhere safe.”

“ I’m safe enough here, I guess.”

“ You’re desperately ill. At any moment the weather may change. I can’t risk it. I’ve got to get you under a roof—somehow.”

“ I’ll be all right,” he muttered monotonously.
“ I’ll be all right.”

She went away, stoked up the fire, and made some soup from a tin. This she watered down and administered it to him. He took but a few spoonfuls, but that was better than nothing. Then she set her mind to the problem. Under his directions she might possibly find the trading-post, but should it be closed down and bolted up their position would only be worsened. The alternative was to make for the hut. It meant he would have to be carried on the sled, and in that case the gold-dust must go. She believed he would never consent to this, but at least he was not in a position to obstruct her. Within a few minutes her plans were completed.

She explored the forest in the neighbourhood of the camp, and ultimately found a deep hollow near a pine tree, in the vicinity of which were many stones and boulders. It promised to be an admirable hiding-place, and very soon she was engaged in transporting the pokes of gold there. When the last bag was cached, she gathered stones and completely covered the hoard.

The camp was then struck, all except the tent which he occupied. Harnessing the cold and miserable mule, she brought the sled close to the remaining tent, and then went inside. He turned his head and recognised her.

"We've got to make a move," he said deliriously. "I want to get that stuff home. After all these years——. Can't hang about any longer."

"The sled is ready," she said. "Come, take

my arm. I'll soon get this tent down and packed."

He stood up, and swayed dreadfully. Then he laughed eerily.

"Had a nightmare about a man with a gun. Silly of me, wasn't it? You're a good girl, Angela."

She wondered who Angela was as she helped him into the sled, and what part she had played in his life. But the immediate needs were too great to dwell upon such things. Working swiftly she got the tent down and rolled up. It made a pillow for his head, and very soon the mule was headed towards the hut.

The old sled-marks were clear in the snow, and frost made the going much easier. For an hour or two Ackroyd slept, and she was glad of this respite. But when he woke up he was fully conscious, and lay blinking at the pearly sky.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Home."

"But that animal can't pull me, and——"

He moved slightly, and felt with his hands the numerous things in the sled.

"Won't you lie still?" she begged.

His head came round, and his feverish eyes seemed to burn into her.

"The gold," he said. "Wasn't there gold here—the gold I was looking for? I saw it with my own eyes, unless—— My God, was that a dream too?"

"You are ill," she said evasively.

"A dream!" he muttered. "Of course it

was all a dream. What a damned fool I am ! ”

She winced as she reflected that, as with Sinclair, the gold was his chief concern. Was there so much difference between them after all ?

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XVII

THE morning sunshine threw long shadows aslant the snow and across the half-frozen river. From the chimney of the hut greyish smoke ascended dead vertically, for there was a complete absence of wind. Outside the hut the absolute immobility gave the scene a painted aspect—but painted by an artist incomparable. During the past two weeks great falls of snow had taken place. It lay over everything, rounding off corners in billowing waves, and reflecting the sunlight with blinding power.

Inside the hut the human element was paramount. Ackroyd was sitting up in his bed for the first time since Helen had brought him home. His face was lean and somewhat drawn as a result of the sickness which had afflicted him. For fifteen days a great fight had taken place inside that log enclosure, and only one person knew how near to defeat she had been.

That person was now expressing her gigantic relief as she tidied up the scullery. Ackroyd's medicine-chest had played no small part in his salvation. At times he had been conscious

enough to tell her what to do, and she carried out his instructions to the letter. That morning for the first time since the awful trip across the snow his temperature had fallen to sub-normal. But there were other signs too to prove that he had passed safely through the valley of the shadow.

To Helen those two weeks had been a nightmare, through which she had struggled and fought against despair, anxiety, and almost hopelessness. Hitherto she had been fortunate in never having come up against serious illness—at least not against the actual proximity of death. The most pitiful part of it was the change in the man himself. Always she had seen him as a magnificent, self-contained creature, at times repellent almost in his self-sufficiency. To see all those proud walls crumbling before her eyes, to witness his utter helplessness, his enfeebled strength, the loss of flesh and muscle—these were the things that hurt her.

Now the fight was over. She believed he possessed splendid recuperative powers. Very soon she would lose this baby of hers. Again he would be the dominating personality he always had been ; accepting no advice, spurning help, laughing at sentiment. It was strange that this impending loss should cause her to feel just a little sad ; but so it was.

“ Helen ! ”

She came to him.

“ Sit down ! ”

“ I haven't time. There are a million things to be done. The place is like——”

"Sit down!"

"There speaks the old Garth Ackroyd," she said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that in any commanding way, but there are some things I must get clear. How's my temperature?"

"Below normal."

"I thought so. I'm through. How long is it since—since you brought me here?"

"Over a fortnight."

"A fortnight! It seems like an eternity—and yet it doesn't. I can't get things in their right order—not know what is real and what belongs to dreams."

"Must you go into that now?"

"Yes. I remember what happened in the grotto. I slipped and fell—cracked my skull against a rock. I don't know how long I lay there unconscious, but when I did recover I called out for you. There wasn't any answer."

"There was no way of getting you out," she said. "I went to Sinclair, begged him to help me——"

"And he wasn't keen, I guess? That place I fell into was a kind of subterranean river. I swam and crawled along it for miles and came out on the other side of the mountain. I managed to get here, and guessed what had happened. I had to stop him. He had my food supply—everything. Your tracks were good in places, but bad in others. Wal, I got there, and that's where things get foggy. Did I shoot him, or was that a dream?"

"It was no dream ; but you didn't shoot him. He tried to shoot you and——"

"Got it now ! The rifle burst in his hands. I buried him. I thought that was real. But there was something else. I got the idea he had found the gold, that he had it with him—in the sled. I could have sworn it was real, but it couldn't have been."

"Suppose it was real ? "

"You don't mean——"

"Yes. Sinclair found it with the aid of your map. He was getting away with it when you arrived. That is what started the trouble."

"Of course. I have not been so mad as I imagined. I remember seeing it—bags of it. But where is it now ? "

"I left it behind," she said softly.

He stared at her with incredulity in his expression.

"You left it ! "

"Yes. It was you or the gold. Are you going to criticise my decision ? "

"No. But——"

She turned away, but he caught her sleeve and retained her.

"I understand," he said. "You did right. I forgot that a mule has its limitations. Was there much of it ? "

"Sinclair estimated it would fetch about forty thousand dollars," she replied in a dead voice.

"Forty thousand dollars ! And what did you do with it ? "

"Hid it in a hole."

" Good God ! If some one should find it—some hunter ! We've got to get it as soon——"

She could stand no more of it. With a choking sob she ran out of the room, and then into the open air. Not one word of gratitude—no sign that he even appreciated the horror which she had gone through ! She sat on a fallen log in the sunshine and strove to calm her overstrung nerves.

The cold, invigorating air, the immaculate setting, and the cloudless pearly sky worked an inevitable miracle. She found herself looking at things differently. Why worry about Ackroyd ? He had his own deep-rooted ideas as to what made for happiness. If it pleased him to bow down to a golden idol, was that any occasion for lamentation on her part ? And duty was duty, whether it was appreciated or not. To allow herself to become depressed because a fool of a man chose to look at life from a different angle was foolish. Here she was, young and healthy, with strong affections for the people she had left at home. Surely it was time she began to worry a little more about them and to think less of this extraordinary man.

Against the anxiety which she suffered could be placed that invaluable asset—experience. For the first time in her life she had come into contact with elementals—hate, revenge, and money-lust. There had been danger too, and a lot of introspection. Doubtless she had needed these things to widen and mature her outlook. In that case she must count her gains and not her losses.

In a more philosophical frame of mind she returned to the hut and resumed work. Ackroyd heard her from within and called out, but she paid no attention to his first summons.

"Helen!"

She banged the broom against some metallic objects and raised a din. Then she began to sing in a loud voice. To her amazement the door suddenly opened and she saw Ackroyd, clad in an old dressing-gown, staring at her.

"Have you gone mad?" she demanded.

"Why didn't you come when I called, instead of kicking up that awful noise?"

"I'm glad you like my voice."

"Can't you be serious?"

"No—not now. I'm never going to be serious again. Get back into bed or you'll catch your death of cold."

"I want to talk to you."

"But I thought our conversation was terminated."

"We'll talk here then," he said doggedly, and sat down in a very unstable chair.

"No. Have it your own way. I'll come—in a moment."

He nodded and left her. She spent a few moments finishing her tidying and then sighed and went into him. He was sitting on the bed, still clad in the dressing-gown.

"I thought I told you——" she commenced.

"Rats!" he ejaculated. "I've finished with that bier. Why did you rush off like that just now?"

"It was just an idea of mine."

"Why not be truthful?"

"Does it pay?"

"I think so."

"Then we'll have a little. I ran off because I was sick of you."

"That's better."

"Splendid! Let's continue. For a fortnight and more you have been playing a hide-and-seek game with death. On two occasions I believed it was all up with you. Well, miracles do happen, even in the twentieth century and up in the mountains. You beat all the odds."

"It looks like it. Does that fact annoy you?"

"What annoys me is that at the moment when you should be thanking God for being spared an early grave in the snow, you start asking about a wretched bundle of gold-dust, and exhibiting childish emotions about it——"

"What!"

"Yes—childish. Death and all his legions couldn't down you, but that yellow metal has got you by the throat and is choking you. You can't think of a single decent thing——"

"Are you——?"

"Sit still. I am just telling you a bit of the truth which you pretend to appreciate so much. You're about ten times more sick than I thought you were, and I'm afraid there's no cure for you."

"Any more?" he asked.

"No. I think that will do for to-day."

"Wait a moment. The prosecution has had its say. Now listen to the defence. I want you

to know exactly what the possession of that gold means to me. With it I intend to right a wrong that was done over ten years ago."

"You've said that before."

"Yes, and I'll say it ten thousand times. When I first made that vow it was over my father's grave. He died in poverty, brought about by a man who hated him—a man named Masters—down in Montreal. Masters broke my father between his fingers. I was studying for my medical diploma at the time. I didn't know what a strain that was upon the old man. I didn't realise that he had worked and suffered all his life to give me a better chance than he ever had. He was a rough man, but a gentleman, and he would be living now but for the shame and disgrace of his bankruptcy. He shot himself in the garden—late one evening."

"Garth!"

"There was a girl in it—Masters' daughter—Angela. I met her at the university and we became friendly. Neither she nor I knew that Masters had an old grudge against my father, until he came to hear that we were friendly. Then he came down on us—forbade any future meetings. I told him to go to hell, and asked the girl if she would marry me secretly. She agreed, but before that could take place, Masters had broken my father by buying up a mortgage and foreclosing mercilessly. I had to leave the university. Medicine was no longer a possible profession. The old man was heart-broken. I told him it didn't matter—that I

could make a living somehow. But he never got over it. Given time he could have come out all square, but Masters gave him no time. Nor did he ever express any sort of regret—even when he heard the news of my father's suicide."

"And the girl?"

"She changed her mind when it was clear to her that I should never be a successful doctor. She pleaded that she had resolved never to marry without her father's approval."

"You loved her?"

"I don't think so."

"But you were going to marry——"

"Does any man at twenty-one years of age know when he is in love? She was pretty, attractive, full of parlour tricks and winsome ways. But she had the Masters' strain in her. She knew what had happened, and never had the decency to come forward and express a regret. I think I had a narrow escape."

"And now you want to revive all that?"

"Yes. Masters has worked himself into a position of power. He imagines himself to be invulnerable. But he isn't. There is something connected with his past which, if known, would ruin him, and roll him into the dust. But to prove that requires money—to bribe certain people. For over ten years I have waited for this opportunity. For seven years I worked myself to a shadow striving to amass the necessary capital. Then came some information which started me on this venture. Well, at last luck is with me. I am going to smash Masters as

completely as he smashed my father. I am going to make his name stink in the nostrils of decent people. That is a fitting end to a dastardly conspiracy."

He banged his fist on the table as he uttered the last words, and in his tense expression she read indomitable resolution. Already he was chuckling with anticipation, gloating over the final victory, which in his opinion would square accounts.

"What do you think of that?" he asked. "You imagined I wanted this gold to indulge in some miserable debauch? I don't—I want it to beat Masters at his own dirty game."

"Isn't that a kind of debauch?" she asked.

"What are you saying?"

"I can't see much difference."

"Then you've no imagination," he replied harshly. "What kind of a man do you think I should be to break a vow solemnly made? What happens to me doesn't matter much. But justice——"

"I think that what happens to you matters a great deal," she said. "And I dread to think what is likely to happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain. Don't ask me. You have your life to lead—I mine. You must go on wherever it may lead, but don't ask me to expatiate upon your cleverness or good fortune."

"You're a curious girl," he muttered. "I don't think I shall ever understand you."

"No, I don't think you will," she replied.

THAT "man proposes and God disposes" was amply proven during the ensuing weeks. Ackroyd's recovery experienced a totally unexpected check, due to a most trivial accident. He ran a small nail into his hand, and thought no more of it. But two days later the minute cut began to display inflammation, and before he could complete his plans to get away his right arm was comparatively useless.

"One delay after another," he growled. "I ought to have put iodine on that cut. I've never failed to do so before."

"It hurts?" she asked.

"Like hell! If the inflammation extends much farther it looks as if my arm will have to come off."

"What!" gasped Helen.

"Well, I've got to watch it."

She knew that this remark was not a very great exaggeration. The arm was a dreadful sight, and undoubtedly was causing him agony. At nights she could hear him turning and tossing, and cursing under his breath. Compassion rendered her sleepless, yet she knew it was useless. It would have been stupid to make suggestions, for his medical knowledge was considerable, and he had made it clear that there was nothing to be done.

"Just when the going was good," he muttered, while he winced with pain. "Here's the result of

forgetting all the things one has learned. Never leave an open wound——. By the way, how is the mule getting on ? ”

“ Badly. The fodder has nearly all gone. I’ve had to ration him, and it doesn’t agree with him.”

“ There seems to be a Jonah in this outfit,” he complained. “ First one thing, then another.” He looked at her fixedly. “ Go on—say what you’re thinking.”

“ There’s no need if you already know it,” she replied quietly.

“ I think I do, but I’m not so childishly superstitious as to worry about it. This arm is going to get better within the next few days or—I’ll do without it.”

“ Why do you say such horrible things ? ”

“ Horrible ! Life is more than a limb.”

“ But you couldn’t——”

“ Oh, there are ways. No, no food for me. I can’t risk it. You eat alone. I’ll lie down for a bit.”

It seemed that he was facing another crisis, and she could not do other than admire his amazing courage. Eat she had to, but there was no joy in the meal, and when she went to attend to the mule its condition was such that she expected another tragedy there before long. To feed it was impossible in the circumstances. The best that Ackroyd could do was to shoot it, before it died from lack of nourishment.

Then the pendulum swung back so far as Ackroyd was concerned. The terrible inflammation

showed signs of dispersing. After a few hours of doubting he ventured an opinion.

"I'll still have two arms," he said grimly.

"You mean——?"

"I'm through—again."

"Thank God!"

The aftermath was a long succession of skin eruptions, which were more annoying than serious. And so the weeks passed, while sunshine and blizzard swept the mountains. The mule had been destroyed. Again they were together, and alone, with the future still nebulous.

"Wal," he said. "The devil has done his worst, maybe. One thing he may find it difficult to do, and that is to prevent spring from coming around. That gives me an idea."

"What?"

"A canoe."

"Can you make one?"

"I don't intend to try. But I might be able to trade for one with the gold-dust which I have here. It would mean a two days' journey to the north, and another two days to get the canoe man-handled down here. When the river opens we could save weeks of time."

"But where can you get a canoe?"

"There's an Indian camp farther up the river. They'll sting me if they know how badly I need it, but I know what's it's worth."

"Do you propose going—alone?"

"That's up to you."

"I'll think it over."

She was fully aware of his real reason for wanting the canoe. But for the hidden gold they could have started the journey on foot when spring was further advanced. Despite his argument about saving time she knew that river-travel would involve long and arduous portages, and that in the long run no time would be saved. But the canoe would undoubtedly solve the problem which loomed largest in his mind—the gold, which he intended to use for a purpose which she considered despicable.

“You’re not fit to make a long journey yet,” she said.

“In a day or two, when this bad patch of weather changes.”

“Hadn’t you better wait until you are really fit.”

“Fit! What’s the matter with me?”

“I seem to remember that something was the matter quite recently.”

“That’s old history. Gosh! to think of the weeks and weeks completely wasted.”

“Has it all been a waste of time?”

“Well, hasn’t it?”

“It depends how you look at it,” she replied evasively.

Taking an introspective view she did not consider it time wasted. To her the crises had been a kind of revelation. What she knew in her heart was that such human accidents were necessary to give one perspective—stability. For some weeks this fine specimen of the human animal had been her baby, as helpless as a puling

child. She had known then what depths there were in the soul that needed plumbing if the whole gamut of human emotions was to be explored.

So much good had come out of it that she could not bring herself to regret what had taken place. Yet on the other side of the account was Ackroyd's crazy desire, his apparent ingratitude, his domineering attitude. She saw him as a rough, unpolished diamond that no metal could scratch, a creature dazed and drunk by an obsession. It detracted from the picture she would have loved to draw—had indeed already drawn in her imagination.

The quest for the canoe did not excite her. True, the alternative, so far as she was concerned, was to stay alone in the hut, and wait for his return. But nervousness was now a thing of the past. The environment no longer filled her with awe. On the contrary, she had come to love the little place, with its incomparable views. Why go tramping across country again?

"I think I'll stay here," she said ultimately.

This decision appeared to cause him some surprise, but he accepted it with a nod of his head.

"That will allow me to make a quick journey," he added ungraciously.

"That's what I thought," she lied.

"There's nothing to worry about here."

"I'm not worrying."

"Good! Anyway you'll have a gun."

She saw him off at last, laden with the bare necessities for his journey, and a long poke of

gold-dust. His farewell was just a curt "So-long," and he did not even avert his head when he reached the spot where the woods would quickly envelop him. The last she saw of him was a pack on broad shoulders, bobbing up and down. Then the forest swallowed him up.

Within a few minutes she was engaged in the task which she had set herself—to kill the four days during which he would be absent. It was equivalent to a spring-cleaning, and involved the complete removal of all the contents of the hut. She had often yearned to do this, but while he occupied the place it was impossible, for he was prone to regard such work as a complete waste of time.

While the daylight lasted the task was not unpleasant, for it afforded her joy to remove accumulations of rubbish and to hear the inflammable waste roaring in the stove, and helping to boil the water that was needed. But when the sun retired behind the brooding mountains and her little world was plunged into death-like silence there advanced those horrors of the wilderness that only years of experience can withstand—loneliness and superstition.

She laughed aloud to kill these illogical demons, but even the laugh was but another bogie. Every slight sound seemed to be magnified enormously, and once she was certain that eyes were peering at her through the window. Then her common sense revolted, and she took a strong hold of her imagination. The cure was drastic but successful. Slipping on a thick bear

parka, and a cap, she went out under the stars and walked by the river over the creaking snow.

Jungle thoughts and fears vanished. She became a rational creature again, amused by her former childish fears. The stars and the snow-draped conifers seemed like old and trusted friends. The night was not evil but good, and silence was a gift from Heaven, if one knew how to make use of it. Somewhere she had read that to be near God one must be alone. Now she was feeling the truth of that.

When at last she returned to the hut she was calm. While she ate a meal her mind was very active. Not to admit that something had happened to her during the past few months would have been hypocritical. The big event had come. The one man of all had entered into her life, but only she was aware of it. The man himself was as completely ignorant as a piece of rock. That he regarded her as an encumbrance was as clear as daylight, even had he not already told her so.

It caused her to wonder why, in the circumstances, her feelings should be what they were. He had no need of her—nor apparently of any other human being. For three long years he had lived alone, heedless of aught but one thing, and that a thing without a soul. So far as she could see he had no ideals, no ambition but to live and enjoy a long-delayed revenge. Her feeling for him should have ended at admiration for his undoubted courage and indomitable will. But it had not. It needed but a slight fanning of the

tiniest spark to start a vast conflagration in her breast, and it was against this possibility that she was fighting, and felt compelled to fight.

The laborious work went on, and slowly the hut became transformed. It seemed a terrible waste of time and effort, with departure pending, but it was something to do, something to keep her occupied until the voyageur came back with—or without—the article he coveted so much.

And come he did at last—barely an hour after she had finished her task to her complete satisfaction. She saw him and two Indians making through the pines towards the hut. The Indians were man-handling a canoe, while Ackroyd strode ahead of them.

“Helen ! ”

She waved her hand at his greeting. He came forward, with his eyes twinkling.

“What did I tell you ? Gee, I had to do some Jew bargaining, but I’ve got the goods. A fine birch craft, capable of holding us and—everything.”

“Splendid ! ”

“You don’t seem very excited,” he protested.

“What do you expect me to do—faint ? ”

He turned to the two Indians and said a word or two to them in a strange dialect. The canoe was dumped outside the door of the hut. As a final gift he gave them a fox skin apiece, and then dismissed them.

“I’ve already settled with the chief of the gang,” he said. “What do you think of it ? ”

“It looks very strong.”

"It is, and light. Look!"

With no apparent effort he lifted the craft in his two arms, and then laid it down gently, and let his gaze run over it for a few seconds.

"Now for a meal," he said. "We've been on the trail since five o'clock. Anything going?"

"The usual menu. Better come and take your choice."

She had imagined he would be astonished at the absolutely changed interior—the spotless floor and the hundred and one improvements—but his thoughts were elsewhere. He did not even notice that the table shone almost like a mirror, nor that the accumulated grease of years had been removed from the cooking-stove.

"I've been working on that map," he said.

"I believe we can go by water all the way, with only two portages, and the longest of them but three miles. The river opens early here, because of the fast current. In a week or two—— And that reminds me. I've another trip to make, and I guess I shall need you."

"What now?"

"The gold. It's better to get it and bring it up here, for it's well out of the river-course. I can man-handle the sled at a pinch."

"Is there any hurry?"

"Sure there is. How do I know that some prowling hunter won't drop across it? I shan't feel happy until its here."

"When do you propose to go?"

"To-morrow, if the weather holds."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Tired? Why that wasn't much more than a jaunt. You got along all right by yourself?"

"Quite all right. I rather enjoyed it."

He shot her a glance to see if this was a jest, but her expression was sphinx-like.

"I thought you might feel a bit nervous," he added.

"Of what?"

"I don't know. People get that way without any real reason. I got mighty near it the first few months I was here."

"What a confession!"

"Well, we're all very much alike—under our skins."

"I hope not."

"Its true all the same."

She smiled as she reflected on this fallacious platitude. For her the opposite held good. What he held as a sacred duty laid upon him she considered mean and utterly unworthy.

ACKROYD had brought the gold home after many arduous hours of hauling it through the woods and across the deep valley. Temporarily he became a beast of burden, with a broad strap round his chest to which was attached ropes. Already she had occasion to observe his tenacity of purpose, and this particular instance sickened her because of what it signified.

Now he sat in the hut applying ointment to the abrasions on his chest caused by the chafing strap. The job was done—his treasure-trove safe from any marauder. He could afford to be light-hearted and unusually facetious.

"When I'm through with this business I'll let myself out as a dray-horse," he said. "But not in this region of the earth. That last uphill climb nearly killed me."

"You don't look much like a corpse."

"Never judge by appearances. Still, I'm not doing so badly. Look! I've marked our route on that map—the red line. It's new country to me, but it ought to take us home. After being stuck away up here for three years the prospect is pretty good. You'll be glad too, I guess."

"Of course."

"Strange how things work out," he said reflectively. "If I hadn't run across you that day, and traded a mule for you——"

"Much against your inclination."

"Well, it was a good mule."

"But not a bad bargain as it turned out."

"No. If things had happened differently I might not have picked up Sinclair. Then I shouldn't have lost the map, and he wouldn't have been able to find—— It's a bit of a mix-up, isn't it?"

"Yes. Life is nothing but a long succession of 'ifs,' and we are never able to say what might have happened, as an alternative to the thing which has happened. Perhaps there isn't any alternative."

"You mean—predestination?"

"Who knows? I started off to take some tubes of vaccine to some isolated Indians, and finished up here. Why? Was it just chance or a mean trick of the powers that be, with no end in view but the perpetration of a senseless jest."

"So that's how you feel about it?"

"What would you expect me to feel?"

He thought for a few moments and then ran his eyes over her.

"I can't see that you've lost much. I'll admit you were fit enough when you came here, but you're fitter now. There's no beauty-parlour on God's earth that could improve your complexion, and you're less plump, better developed in all your limbs——"

"When you've finished with my limbs."

"And look at the experience you've had—all for nothing. There's a good story too—about the fellow who bought you like an Indian squaw, with a mule that he thought was more useful to him."

"Thought? For heaven's sake don't start being contrite."

"Well, you haven't panned out so badly. I've made a man of you—or very nearly so."

She capped this in one crushing spontaneous retort.

"Thank you, Garth Ackroyd. I wish I could say the same about you."

He clapped his hand to his chest as if he had been mortally wounded, and then laughed gaily.

"I hand you the biscuit, Helen. There was

another Helen whom men fought over. Well, I wouldn't fight over you. I'd hand you, with a consolation prize, to the first ruffian that came along."

"And I think I should be pleased," she replied.

"Peace," he laughed, holding up his crossed fingers. "I give you best. Nature gave you a more potent weapon than teeth and claws. You're bullet-proof."

"Insult proof," she corrected. "I am certain you think I ought to feel honoured at meeting the redoubtable Garth Ackroyd on his native heath—I mean his adopted wilderness? If I had never seen another man in the world I might feel deeply impressed by this curious specimen of *homo sapiens*——"

"Good on you! I had almost forgotten my biology. Now give it a rest, or you'll drive me mad."

"One more word—the last one. Since I have been here I have learned one outstanding truth."

"Well?"

"The greatest mistake that Nature ever made was when she took an ape down from the trees and stood him on his back legs—and called him man."

With this she turned away and stoked up the fire with such a din and rattle that any further comment from him would have been inaudible. It was her way of covering up what she felt most deeply. In a hundred different ways he had disappointed her, and yet there remained this

unreasonable craving which shame and fear compelled her to conceal.

"Is it a jazz-band?" he shouted, with his hands to his ears.

"Your nerves are out of order," she replied. "You need more exercise."

"Stop it, or I'll throw you out!"

"I don't need to be thrown. I'll go—with pleasure."

Outside the air was cold to breathe, and the scene, as ever, breathlessly beautiful. The precious canoe was under the awning where the mule had been housed, covered up with sacks. She gazed at it and then at the frozen river. Soon would come the day when the great silence would be broken by the musical flow of the water. Down that entrancing stream she and Ackroyd would go. Out of her life would pass the place where she had spent those eventful months, and soon after he too must go.

She began to wonder what would become of him after he had achieved his main object in life—presuming he did achieve it? Here was a man gifted by Nature in many respects—a failure in so far as his original training was concerned. Would he, like so many others, drift on through life to no safe and useful anchorage? And herself? Would she again find peace at home, with the old familiar things about her, and the only real adventure of her life but a fading dream?

What he had asserted was true in more than one respect. The feeling of physical well-being

was paramount. The great cold no longer hurt her, and health was a thing she never considered, as it never should be by those who possess it in abundance. But the greater changes were psychological. The old Helen Mandison was gone, never to return. Grafted on to that bare stump was the new woman—a dynamic creature with a broadened outlook that had been dragged up from the deep and fixed in the light of day for ever.

This new woman was making big demands of life. They could not be met by soulless images. It was as if she had fashioned with her own deft and subtle fingers an idol, who wore the face and form of Garth Ackroyd and yet was not him.

“Perhaps I’m a little mad,” she thought.

Her mind turned to Wilbur Stimson, the only man who had ever made love to her, and who had offered her “Pop’s” business and a life of pampered leisure. That silly little goof had believed it was all she was capable of desiring. She imagined herself the wife of Wilbur, petted and kissed to exhaustion, with perhaps a couple of little Wilbur’s in due course. Ugh!

Why this effete figure of Wilbur should stand out so strongly at this moment was strange, unless it was because she was subconsciously striving for contrasts—subtly erecting Ackroyd on a pedestal which she outwardly swore did not belong to him. But there the contrast was—ennobling the barbarian until she frowned.

“Silly little fool!” she muttered.

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At long last came the day she welcomed, and yet dreaded. The winter had gone its way, and although the land, in places, still bore snow, the river was free of ice, and singing a deep note. This miracle of early spring brought an inevitable reaction to herself. She was conscious of a feeling of rapture, of strange lightness of heart and mind.

Over-night the canoe had been placed in the water and moored to a slender, overhanging tree, and such gear and provisions as were needed were piled high in the wash-house, ready for loading. At the first sign of the dawn Ackroyd was up and busy. When she joined him most of the gear was already in the canoe.

"The ideal day for river travel," he said. "Maybe we'll strike a patch of ice lower down where the river runs slower, but it won't be so thick that we cannot smash it, and win through. Will you get breakfast while I handle the rest of this stuff?"

"Will it all go aboard?"

"Yes—and more."

"But you've taken all the food?"

"No, I've left what we shall need for breakfast by the side of the stove."

While she tackled the breakfast he finished loading the canoe, with the exception of the pokes of gold-dust, which he would not trust out of his sight.

"Ready!" she called at last.

He came and joined her, paying a brief tribute to the attractive repast. For some reason her

own appetite was meagre, but he suffered from no such trouble.

"Why don't you eat?" he asked.

"I have."

"Enough for a canary. Come, it's the last comfortable sit-down meal you'll get for some days, and open-air life makes big demands. More beans?"

"No, thank you."

"I will then," he said, helping himself. "If I didn't know you better I should say you were slimming."

"Perhaps I am."

"Not you. You don't need it. You're just right."

"Have you ever adjudicated at a cattle show?" she asked.

"Have I what?"

"I thought perhaps you had. I've got a few things to put aboard. I'll get them now."

Before they left she insisted on washing up all the dirty plates and cooking utensils—a decision which annoyed him greatly.

"Why worry about trifles?" he asked.

"Anyone would think I proposed letting the shack furnished."

"Suppose you come back here again, would you like to find these things lying about in their present state?"

"It's never too late to wash."

"That's the difference between you and me," she said. "I like clearing up as I go. If I left things in a disgraceful state of untidiness I

should have them on my conscience for the rest of my life. I should dream about this place, and see messy sardine-tins, a foul frying-pan, greasy dishes——. Ugh ! ”

“ But what does it matter ? ”

“ It does matter. I’ll come when I’ve finished.”

“ Well, for God’s sake hurry up,” he said impatiently. “ I want to be moving.”

Ultimately things were arranged to her satisfaction. She damped down the fire, made sure the windows were fastened, took a last look at her bedroom, and then intimated that she was ready.

“ Good ! I’ll fix the door.”

“ Is it your hut ? ” she inquired.

“ Yes. Bought it from a fellow who used it for hunting. I got it for a few hundred dollars—all the money I possessed.”

“ What’ll you do now—sell it ? ”

“ No.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ I may need a place to call my own. I’ve been happy here—in a way.”

She signified her surprise at this remark by tilting her eyebrows.

“ And damned miserable too,” he added.

“ Since I intruded, of course ? ”

“ Perhaps. But don’t stand there talking. Everything is fixed. Come on ! ”

She walked with him to the bank, and saw the canoe scientifically loaded. The cargo of gold-dust was not visible, for he had stacked it well

astern, and heaped multifarious articles of gear over it.

"Can you swim?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good!"

"Is swimming included in this trip?"

"You never know, but I hope not," he added grimly. "Step aboard, and mind how you step. This isn't a barge."

She occupied the seat behind him, and breathed heavily as, with the paddle, he pushed the canoe out from the calm pool. It soon found the strong current, and began to drift. Then the blade of the long paddle was thrust deep into the water. Faster and faster went the canoe, bobbing on the strong current. She twisted her neck and saw the hut, half-hidden by the tall pines.

"She's great," he said, referring to the canoe.

"Answers to the paddle like a charm."

No response came from her, for there was a lump in her throat. It was stupid, ridiculous. This kind of sentiment showed lamentable weakness of character. But there it was.

"According to the map," he said over his shoulder, "there's a good fall in the river for over forty miles. Then it broadens, and we may strike ice. At five miles an hour that should take eight hours."

The hut was vanishing into the blue as a big bend in the river was turned. At last it went completely.

"Did you hear what I said?" he asked.

"No."

"What's wrong—gone deaf?"

"Yes," she said. "Deaf to trivialities."

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XX

THE first day of river travel had passed—a day of completely new experiences for Helen. She had confused memories of wooded banks, bare frowning cliffs, treacherous rapids, and hideous whirlpools. There had been breathless moments when it looked as if capsizal was inevitable, but through it all the dexterous pilot brought his frail craft, to a long and beautiful "reach" where two rivers joined forces.

"Right on time," he said joyously. "We'll camp yonder—on that shelving bank."

The canoe was moored, tents erected, and a fire lighted. She wondered if he was going to remove the precious cargo from the canoe, but on this occasion he let it stay.

All the thrills of the day were over, and it was good to sit on terra firma and reflect upon the incidents of the day, while the blazing pine branches threw weird shadows. Though at a lower elevation, the air was still cold, and patches of yet unthawed snow lay in sheltered spots. While he ate Ackroyd scanned the map.

"There's a portage three miles farther down," he said. "But maybe it will be possible to avoid it."

"How?"

"By risking the rapids. Can't say whether its possible until I have a look at the place. That was a tough stretch at Blue Gulch. We missed trouble there by about a finger's breadth."

"You've never been this way before?"

"No."

"Suppose it lands us at a dead end?"

"I'm backing the map, and if that's correct we shall strike the railway about two hundred miles from here."

"Five days?"

"Oh, no. We can't hope to equal yesterday's distance. Maybe eight or ten."

"I wish I could get a message home," she said.

"It may be possible, but I don't know how the telegraph runs in these parts."

"Shan't we touch any town at all?"

"There's nothing on the map—except a place called Narraby. That's fifty miles farther down, but it may stand for anything. But what does a day or two more or less matter after all this time?"

"It does matter when people are suffering great anxiety. My father and brother must have gone through hell."

"You'll have an interesting story to tell them," he said. "You might make a pile of dollars by selling it to the Press."

"How your whole mind hinges on dollars," she retorted.

"I was thinking of you."

"Thanks, but I crave neither money nor notoriety."

"You'll get the latter whether you like it or not," he said. "'Beautiful missing girl suddenly returns to life. Amazing story of Helen Mandison.'"

"You'd better write it," she said. "I don't doubt you could make an exciting story of it."

"I could, but I don't intend to."

"Why not?"

"I've more important things to attend to."

"In Montreal?" she asked boldly.

"Yes."

"And afterwards?"

"I'm not concerned about that. 'One thing at a time, and that done well'," he quoted.

"By gosh, and I'll do it well too. I'm going to pay off everything with compound interest."

"Splendid!" she ejaculated, with biting scorn. "I knew you were that sort of man."

He attacked the fire angrily with his boot, and sent up a shower of sparks. One of them fell on the back of her hand, and she gave a little cry of pain. He came across to her.

"Let me look?"

"It's nothing," she said.

Without more ado he seized her hand and held it while he scanned the slight burn.

"Sorry!" he muttered. "But you have a way of touching me on the raw. All the same, it was damned silly. I'll get some oil."

"No!"

"You sit still."

The oil was produced and he applied it with the tips of his fingers.

"You'll do," he said. Then, hesitating, "I guess you'd like to shoot me, eh?"

"What makes you arrive at that conclusion?"

"You're general attitude. I don't come within miles of your standard of masculinity. Well, that's a misfortune in a way, because no normal creature likes to be hated——"

"Hated!"

"Treated contemptuously. It comes to the same thing in the end. I've lived a sort of barbarian existence, respecting nothing but things that were stronger than myself. It taught me to be self-reliant, and I don't intend to forget any of those lessons. All the same, it isn't part of my philosophy to hurt people."

"I never thought it was."

"That's all right then. Now we understand each other."

"Oh, quite!"

He went back to his seat, and filled a pipe from the bottom of a worn rubber pouch. He then turned the pouch inside out and shook a few shreds of tobacco from the bottom.

"Empty," he said. "Another of life's little consolers exhausted. I've been on fine rations for months too."

"Does it help—smoking?" she asked.

"Not so much when there is somebody with you, but when you're alone—— What does all this business of living mean? You see it everywhere—birth, death, and re-birth. It

seems to lead nowhere and to reveal no good purpose."

"Shouldn't living itself be sufficient end ? "

" Living—for what ? "

" For the joy of it—for the pleasure of others. What sort of an end do you expect, or desire ? "

" I don't know."

" You can imagine nothing ? "

" Can you ? " he demanded.

" Yes."

" What, then ? "

" I don't think you would understand, because you just said you respect nothing but the things that are stronger than yourself."

" Well, isn't that religion ? "

" No. It is far more religious to respect the things that are weaker than yourself. What merit is there is respecting a bull elephant or a tidal wave ? "

" Weak things," he retorted. " What is all this but a struggle for existence—the survival of the fittest ? "

" The fittest—not the strongest. I don't think much of your philosophy, Garth."

" Perhaps not, but it works. Imagine some snivelling nincompoop taking the canoe down Blue Gulch to-day. Where would he have ended up do you think ? "

" I don't know—and neither do you. So the less you say about it the better."

" There speaks Helen of the heavy hand. What I like about you is your infernal cheek."

" So you do like something about me ? "

"At times—when you stand up on your hind legs, with claws exposed, ready for battle. Why you're the living proof of my philosophy. Admit it."

"I would die first."

"But you are. I saw your face when we were tearing down those rapids. You were scared to death, but you just shut your teeth and looked things straight in the face. Unfortunately one swallow doesn't make a summer, and you don't alter my general assessment of humanity."

"What is your general assessment?"

"It's rotten—not worth saving from the pit it is fast digging for itself."

"It would be interesting to know by what wonderful mental process you arrive at such profound conclusions."

"One doesn't need to be a sage to find out how straws blow in the wind. Do you find the world so pretty?"

"I find it anything but rotten."

"With millions of people starving in China and granaries bulging with unsaleable wheat in Canada?"

"Would you damn creation because of a passing phase?"

"Yet men die while it passes, and little children are eaten by——"

"Stop!" she cried.

"You don't believe that?"

"I can't! I won't!"

"Refusing to accept facts doesn't make them less true. I have little patience with that

fellow who can sing lustily 'All's well with the world. God's in His Heaven,' and remain deaf and blind to the creaking of the wheels and the gathering of the shadows."

"There is more poetry in that than common sense," she retorted. "You don't believe all that rubbish. It is just the work of a microbe that has got into your blood."

"It is the result of my observation. I'm not blaming any hypothetical Deity for the state of things—only the creatures in whom He apparently puts so much faith. Most of them are not worth two little damns."

"That's bile," she replied. "As a man with some knowledge of medicine you ought to be able to work a cure."

"There are times when I feel I should slap you."

"If it would reduce your blood-pressure I should have no objection. But I thought it wasn't part of your philosophy to hurt people?"

"It isn't. But there is such a thing as provocation."

"Do I provoke you?"

"Incessantly."

"What would you have me say to please you?"

"Nothing. I don't want you to please me. What the devil do you mean?"

"Men are peculiar animals. They are quite sure they do not want to be complimented—flattered. Yet my poor knowledge of history tells me that from the dawn of civilisation to its

present decline—according to you—almost every so-called great man has been made a fool of by some woman. When it wasn't a woman, it was the mob. Applause, acclamation—men have lived on these, while all the time they have violently protested against the accusation. Thank God I have found a man who is different."

"There's a grain of truth in that," he admitted. "It's a little surprising to find a girl of your age so well read."

"It's more surprising to find a man of your age so ignorant of women. You must have met very few."

"Yes—thank God!"

"Where did they fail to come up to your standard?"

"Everywhere. The old-fashioned type of woman who took a husband as a partner is gone. The modern woman thinks that by virtue of having two children, grudgingly, she is entitled to employ a nurse to look after them, and remain dormant for the rest of her existence. Men work and sin for them. The world is flooded with cheap trash for their personal adornment. Behind every crime is a woman."

"Also behind most acts of nobility. If men cheat and murder to please women, they also occasionally behave like gods to the same end. The trouble with you is your inconsistency. You take a delight in telling only half the truth. If you married an angel, Garth, you would complain that her wings incommoded you, and were also inclined to moult in season."

At this retort he uttered a short, amused laugh.

"It wasn't meant to be funny," she said.

"It was, all the same. I have the strongest grounds for believing that angels are asexual, so your point loses its force."

"The fact is you don't believe in them at all."

"I don't."

"Only in yourself. Outside and beyond that, nothing?"

"If you go on like that you'll find yourself in deep water," he replied. "It is quite a nice, and legitimate, argument whether there is anything outside oneself. You may have heard of Berkeley?"

"Yes. I have also heard of Johnson, and his method of rebutting Berkeley's argument."

He gazed at her with surprise writ clear in his expression.

"How old did you say you were?" he asked.

"As old as Eve. As old as the world. We're all as old as that, aren't we?"

"But seriously?"

"I am deadly serious. There's a girl who calls herself Helen Mandison who had a first birthday some twenty years ago. I know her at times, and sometimes I don't. On occasion I take a violent dislike for her—equally as violent as yours. When she is in evidence for any great length of time I positively hate her. In moments of abstraction I try to detach from a tangled web of personalities this person who is now speaking

to you, but she—it—persistently eludes me. I wonder if you know her better than I? ”

“ Metaphysics,” he muttered. “ They won’t get you anywhere. You’ve got to take a grasp of what is plain and clear, or there may be nothing to grasp at all.”

“ Delightful ! When nothing is plain and clear. Life isn’t as easy as all that. A great man once said, ‘ A mountain of gold does not suffice for one man’s needs ’.”

“ So you dabble in Buddhism ? ”

“ I hope I don’t dabble in anything. But some things are so true they go deep down in one. Now I think I will go to bed.”

“ No.”

“ I’m tired.”

“ I’m not. My mind is all wound up. Nothing about all this seems real. You’re not real. Where did you come from, and why do you sit and look——? Don’t go. I must talk to-night. I thought I had got over the need for companionship, but you have stirred up all the mud again in the still pool——”

“ Mud ! ”

“ Yes, the mud of troubled waters. Why not stay and talk a little more ? ”

The invitation was obviously genuine, and it sounded strange on top of his recent iconoclastic remarks, but she was nervous of the outcome of long heart-to-heart talks in such an environment. There was so much in him which belied his assertions, and she was fully aware of repressed desires in her own breast.

"I really am tired," she said. "It is the cold, fresh air, I suppose."

"Well, if you must——"

"Yes. Sleep is necessary. Good night!"

"Good night! And don't forget we leave early in the morning."

Her excuse was genuine, but had it not been she would still have gone, for he was becoming more and more a danger to her self-sufficiency. Later on she heard sounds as if some one were moving about the camp. She got up and peered through the flap of the tent. It was bright moonlight, and Ackroyd was leaning over the canoe, searching for something. Finally he was satisfied and went back to his tent.

She had no doubt he had gone to make sure that his gold was safe. Probably he had dreamed about it, and the risk that he ran. There was something particularly repulsive in the whole business, his creeping out, like a miser, to touch the thing he worshipped. Yes, it was horrid enough, and it helped to harden her heart and reinforce her resolution.

Came dawn, laying its amber fingers on the tiny camp and filling the valley with light. A bird sang close by and there seemed to be a general stirring of invisible life. The pungent smell of cooking food assailed her nostrils, and mingled with it was the elusive odour of the pines.

"Late again," he said as she emerged.

"Is dawn late?"

"Dawn! Why it's been light for hours."

"You have a tendency to exaggerate," she said. "Pouf, what a vile smell!"

"I burnt the frying-pan."

"You should have waited for me."

"You don't appear to realise I'm in a hurry. There's your ration."

"Burnt to a cinder."

"You're hard to please. It's a good job I know you."

She tackled the breakfast and found it good, despite its overcooked condition. While she ate he was busy dismantling the tents and carrying things into the canoe. Never had she witnessed such feverish excitement. Now he was examining the map.

"It's pretty clear there is a big fall in the river a few miles farther down," he mused. "I don't want to make a portage if I can avoid it."

"Suppose you have to?"

"I'll be able to manage the canoe. You can help with the smaller stuff. It would mean about three journeys in all—a devil of a waste of time."

"What is a day or two, more or less, after all these months?" she asked.

He recalled his own remark to the same effect, and scowled at her. A quarter of an hour later the spot was bare of everything except the ashes of the fire, and he was pushing the canoe out into the stream.

"We'll know our fate soon," he said.

Away they went, now at a more gentle pace, for the river was broad at this point, and the current

sluggish. The wide sweep of water looked uncommonly beautiful, and on its margins the pines were mirrored in it.

"Wonderful place," she said.

He did not hear, for his eyes were fixed on the water ahead, while his bare, muscular arms wielded the paddle in rhythmic motion. Half an hour later there was a noticeable increase in the flow of water and the banks of the river began to narrow. Ackroyd nodded towards the many tiny whirlpools.

"Getting close," he said. "Looks like being a regular snorter."

"Are you going to risk it ? "

"Can't say—yet. Nervous ? "

"About as nervous as you."

He laughed and stuck the blade of the paddle deeper into the water. Their speed increased, and increased ; and then she became aware of a kind of heavy droning ahead of them.

"The rapids," he said. "What about it ? "

"You're the pilot," she shouted. "Not me."

"I'll say I am," he replied. "And here goes ! "

AT Narraby the Karnak river was best part of half a mile wide, for several smaller mountain torrents made confluence with it at this point, forming what was practically a lake.

On the northern side a timber barrier enclosed about one-third of the watery expanse, and a wooden chute, running snakily through a forest of tree-stumps, fed this enclosure with pine-logs from the virgin forests high above the river.

On the foreshore were some corrugated-iron huts, and near them a larger timber building, which served as a store to meet the needs of the lumbermen, whose living-quarters were not visible from the water. The rattle of a donkey-engine and a coil of blue smoke on the edge of the clearing served as evidence of their existence. And every few minutes logs slid down the chute and disturbed the waters of the enclosure.

A small jetty had been built out near the store, and to this, in season, came the small steamer from down-river, which was the connecting link between the lumber lands and the big saw-mills. Now normal river traffic was opening and big floats of logs were being prepared for their fifty-mile journey.

In his office, near the scene of toil, Jack Tanbury, the boss logger, was preparing himself for an unpleasant task. Long experience had hardened him, and six months of isolation in this beautiful but lonely spot had not sweetened his temper. He pushed aside some papers, and turned to the clerk.

"Have you got out those figures, Jim ? "

"Sure ! Here's the tally."

Tanbury picked up the slip of paper, ran his eye over some figures, and then opened a small safe, and took out a cash-box. From this he

counted out three piles of notes and some loose cash.

"Get those guys in here," he said. "I'm through with them."

The clerk nodded, buttoned up his coat and went outside. Five minutes later he returned with three burly lumberjacks. One of them had a black eye, another a terribly swollen jaw, adorned with sticking-plaster, and the third no facial disfigurements at all. They stood before Tanbury, very self-possessed—even defiantly.

"You want us, boss?" said the unscarred man.

"I do. Here's your back wages, and the sooner you get out of camp the better I shall like it."

"What's that?" growled the biggest man.

"I'm not going into long explanations. A man was badly hurt last night, and I know who started that horseplay. It's happened before on a smaller scale. You're fired—all three of you."

"Hey, you can't fire us," mumbled the man with the swollen jaw.

"By gosh I can, and I'm doing it right now," roared Tanbury. "There's your wages. Pick it up and be off."

"I'll see you——!"

"You can walk out on your feet, or be carried out," snapped Tanbury. "Just take your choice. The Irish gang would only be too pleased to show you the way."

Billing, the big Californian, let loose a scornful

laugh, but it was plain to him that Tanbury was not the sort of man to make threats which he had no intention of carrying out.

"Let's beat it, boys," he said. "Speaking for myself, I've been sick of this outfit for months past. Count your dough, Harry, and you too, Jeff. I wouldn't trust this damned company where ten cents are concerned."

They all counted the money, and finally pocketed it. Then they marched towards the door, Billing bringing up the rear.

"And I want you out of camp, remember that," said Tanbury, as a parting shot.

"Guess you think you own the —— earth!" snarled Billing. "Where are we going to sleep?"

"I don't know, and don't care."

"Nice little feller, ain't you? Well, we ain't so keen to look at your ugly mug any more. Boys, we'll book suites at the hotel on the fore-shore, until the big liner comes along. Maybe Mac will be glad of three paying guests. Come on!"

A little later the three descended to the timber building run by one Angus MacMurray, carrying on their backs all their worldly goods. The business-like Scot, who had but recently turned his shack into a profitable concern, was not at all pleased to find three prospective guests waiting on the doorstep.

"I've no' the accommodation," he said, and made to close the door. But Billing prevented this.

"Jest you listen to reason, Mac," he said.

" We're wanting a roof to sleep under and we'll pay you good and well."

" I'm telling ye——"

" You're telling us nothing. Show us the rooms. We ain't objectin' to two rooms between the three of us. I'll turn in with Harry here, but Jeff makes nasty noises in the throat——"

" You oughter talk, you wheezy polecat," retorted Jeff.

" Wal, what do yer say ? " asked Billing.

" Why are ye no sleeping in camp ? " queried MacMurray.

" We've resigned. That outfit didn't come up to our moral standard. We jest walked out."

MacMurray allowed his tanned face to relax into a grin.

" Fired, I'm thinking," he said. " Well, I'm no taking in any lodgers, thank ye kindly."

Billing kicked the door full open with his heavy boot, and made a gesture to his companions to enter. But MacMurray quietly produced a tremendous revolver from some mysterious place and cocked it.

" I'm no' a quarrelsome kind o' mon," he said. " But I've me ain idee-as as to what's pree-ventable and what is inevitable. Wud ye mind standing off my doorstep ? "

Billing stared into the quiet grey eyes, and then at the steady weapon.

" Wal, will you trade us a sleeping tent ? " he asked.

" It'll cost ye twenty dollars."

" Twenty ! "

"Aye, and maybe the price will rise a wee bit if ye canna make up yer mind."

"Lousey old robber! All right, we'll take it."

Provided with the cheap tent the three desperadoes wandered along the foreshore looking for the best place to pitch it. Billing, as usual, had the last word. There was little to choose between him and his companions, but of the three he was the biggest and the most quarrelsome and pugnacious. Between him and Jeff there existed friction, which at times was fanned into bellicose action, but despite this they stuck together, having so much in common. Harry was equally soulless, but quieter in his demeanour, particularly at this moment, when his jaw was almost dislocated.

"A swindle," grumbled Billing, as he drove in a tent-peg savagely. "This yere lump of canvas ain't worth a couple of bucks. And we'll need food. Hang on to that guy-rope, Jeff, instead of rubbing that optic of yourn."

Jeff growled something as he obeyed, and in due course the tent was erected and their various belongings stowed inside.

"Look here," said Jeff. "Why don't we beat it for the coast? What's the good of rotting in this dead hole?"

"Shut up?" snarled Billing. "Ain't there a steamer due in ten days? She'll take us back all right. I ain't footing it across that wild country. Where's them fish-lines you had, Harry?"

A quarter of an hour later the three of them were engaged in trying to win a meal from the

lake. But fish were scarce, and in an hour all they had to show was a one pound rainbow trout.

"We'll sure have to trade for some grub with that goldarned Scot," grumbled Billing. "Harry, you'd better go and——"

He stopped as a canoe suddenly hove into sight. It was being paddled at great speed by a man in a blue shirt, while behind him another figure was engaged in baling out water with a tin can.

"Gosh! She's riding low," exclaimed Billing. "Must have damaged a timber. She'll never make it."

"She will," said Jeff.

"I'll lay you an even dollar."

"That's a bet."

The canoe was now making for the shelving piece of foreshore just below their camp. Despite the tremendous efforts of the paddler and the clockwork actions of the baler it was touch and go.

"You lose," chortled Billing.

"I don't," retorted Jeff. "Gosh! that fellow's a regular gas-engine, and his mate——"

"It's a woman!" ejaculated Billing. "Here they come!"

The canoe came like an arrow straight for the foreshore. The bottom touched the gravel and she came to a sudden stop. The perspiring paddler was Ackroyd. He stepped out into six inches of water and waded ashore.

"You sure cost me a dollar," said Billing. "I

had a wager you wouldn't make it. Where do you come from ? ”

“ Up-river. What is this—a lumber camp ? ”

“ Sure ! ”

“ Good ! I've bumped her bottom on a rock, and she's leaking badly. I'm wanting some tools. Where's the foreman ? ”

“ Right up in that hut, near the donkey-engine.”

“ Guess I'll go and see him.” He turned to Helen, who was hot and tired from her exertions.

“ Stay right there, Helen.”

“ I want to come ashore, Garth.”

“ No, you stay. I'll fix this.”

“ But there may be telegraphic communication——”

“ I'll find out.”

He began to stride up the hill, leaving her to face her trio of admirers, who pretended to be engaged in fishing, but were really more interested in other things.

“ Honeymoon cruise ? ” asked Billing boldly.

“ Not quite,” she replied. “ Can you tell me if there is a telegraph line here ? ”

“ Not on your life.”

“ Where is the nearest ? ”

“ Fifty miles down-river.”

“ Is that a store yonder ? ”

“ A kind of a store, but it don't keep hair-pins, nor face-powder. This is a man's place, I guess.”

“ So it seems.”

Billing turned his head and saw Ackroyd

mounting to the camp. He then looked again at the canoe, and then wandered along to Harry, who was farthest away.

"Nice little craft, Harry," he said.

"Sure!"

"Keen on staying here—and rotting?"

"Eh?"

"I just wondered."

Harry got his meaning, and chewed on nothing for a few seconds.

"Ain't seaworthy," he said at last.

"Not now, but she will be."

"He'd fight."

"No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't be here. When he's put her right he'll go back and return the tools. Savvy?"

"Sure! But——"

Jeff then joined them, and a little later they made for their tent. Ackroyd came back with hammer, nails, a screwdriver, and some tow. He was glad to find the trio gone, and helped Helen ashore in order that he could pull the canoe farther on to the small beach. There he started work on the damaged timber.

"There's a telegraph station fifty miles down-river," he said. "That timbered place yonder is a store. We can lay in a few things and make the going easier. It's only one plank, and won't take long to put right. You go and trade for some canned stuff—meat especially. Here's some money."

She brought back a number of things, and then watched him complete his task. It was a neat,

strong piece of work and he was satisfied it would hold for some time.

"I'll take good care not to bump her again," he said. "Gee, that was tough going. I guess few people have run that patch of water and got through. You were great."

"I was terribly frightened."

"Not you!"

"Yes, when we hit that rock. Swimming would have been out of the question. It was madness to take that risk."

"You're right. I didn't guess it would fall away like that—for mile after mile. They tell me the river runs dead flat for fifty miles, so it will be easy going. You'll be able to take the second paddle. It will relieve the monotony."

"Monotony!" she exclaimed. "A lot of room for monotony there has been."

"Well, the worst is over. Within two days your folk will know you are safe. It's round about noon. Shall we eat here or find a quieter spot farther down?"

"Not here. That engine makes an awful din. I've got to hate noises."

"Good! You're sure you've got everything we need? We aren't likely to get another chance to buy anything."

"We're all right now."

"Then I'll return these tools to the foreman. Decent sort of a chap, but damned inquisitive."

"That's quite natural in the circumstances, isn't it?"

"Well—yes. You wait here. I shan't be long."

He left her sitting on a rock close by the canoe. She watched him mount and mount between the tree-stumps, and at last saw him reach the hut. There he turned and waved to her. Then she became aware of the approach of the three fishermen. Billing was foremost.

"Everything OK now?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you."

He gazed into the canoe.

"Good job o' work I call that. What do you say, Harry?"

Harry came and inspected the craft. He nodded his head and looked at Jeff. What happened next was accomplished so swiftly that Helen scarcely had time to think. Billing suddenly pushed the canoe into the water. Harry jumped into it, and Jeff made to crowd himself amid the gear.

"Stop!" she cried.

"Fling some of that stuff overboard!" said Billing. "We shan't need it. Hurry!"

While Jeff did this Harry drove the paddle into the water. The canoe began to move out into the stream. Helen, aghast at what was happening, rushed into the water—knee deep. She reached the side of the canoe, and clung on.

"You thieves!"

"Lay off!" growled Billing, and brandishing the spare paddle.

But she clung all the tighter and threatened to capsize the craft. Billing realised the danger,

and then saw Ackroyd at the top of the clearing.

"He's coming!" he muttered. "This creature's gone plumb crazy. Hit her on the hands!"

Jeff's paddle came down on her fingers, but still she clung on desperately, hoping to delay departure until Ackroyd could come to the rescue.

"Well, if you won't go, you can come for keeps," snarled Billing.

With this he grabbed her by the waist and lifted her clean into the canoe. To make more room the medicine-chest and some other things had to go overboard.

"Hold her, Jeff!" he panted, "and give me that paddle!"

Jeff did his job only too well. She found herself pinned down and incapable of moving an inch. Then the two paddles got to work. The canoe began to move at a great rate. Helen got a glimpse of the foreshore. Ackroyd was coming down the steep hill like a cannon ball. He reached the water and ran out towards the moving canoe. The water deepened until it reached his waist and then his shoulders. But still he came, now swimming with a powerful overarm stroke.

The canoe drew away into deep and faster water. The swimmer finally gave up, at which Billing jeered and waved his paddle. Ten minutes later they were running between gaunt rock walls, and the lumber camp had disappeared from view.

THE three desperadoes expressed sighs of relief as all signs of civilisation were left behind, and Jeff now permitted Helen to sit in a natural position.

"And don't start fidgeting," he warned, or we'll sure capsize. This craft wasn't made to carry so many."

"You thieves!" she protested.

Billing turned his head and glared at her.

"You can can all that stuff," he said. "We jest happened to be in a hurry, and had to go borrowing, so to speak. That hefty-looking husband o' yourn——"

"Husband! He's not my——"

She stopped suddenly as she reflected that this impetuous denial was indiscreet. Jeff sniggered.

"Now ain't that a shocking scandal," he said. "A kind of unofficial honeymoon right out in nowhere. Oh, boy, some men are sure lucky."

Helen shot him a look that was dangerous enough to kill, but it had no effect upon him.

"Tell us he's your brother," he said, "and we'll sure bust with surprise."

A jolt of the canoe sent him off his balance, and he collapsed on top of the gear, so heavily that Billing yelled out a warning.

"Sit still, you blamed bullock!"

Jeff did not reply. He was examining the hard substance on which he had fallen. Helen

breathed hard as she saw him remove a rug and expose the stacked pokes of gold-dust. He lifted one of them up, and his eyes bulged as he realised what it was he was holding. Then he burrowed with his hands like a terrier dog.

"Jumping snakes!" he ejaculated.

Again Billing turned his head.

"Are you agoing to——?" he commenced.

"Take a slant at that!" said Jeff excitedly.

"There's a cartload of it. Boys, we've struck it!"

Billing shipped his paddle and reached across. The heavy poke was handed to him. He untied the neck and poured out some of the contents into his hand.

"Gold, by gosh!"

The three of them were now completely hypnotised. Paddling was stopped and the canoe drifted down the stream. Billing turned his avaricious glance to Helen.

"So this is why you were so mighty keen to prevent us from getting away?" he asked.

"Does it strike you as being unnatural for anyone to try to prevent a dirty gang of thieves from being successful?" she retorted.

"You got a nice soft tongue," he replied. "Wal, we'll take care of it for you—won't we boys?"

"You've said it," agreed Jeff.

Billing suddenly became conscious of the danger of idly drifting. He tied up the poke, placed it with the rest, and seized the paddle.

"Get to it, Harry," he said. "We can't

afford to stop until we've done twenty miles. Put some life into it."

The two paddles now worked like bits of machinery, and the canoe moved forward at a great speed. Helen's gaze swept both shores of the river, in the hope of seeing human beings to whom she might make an appeal; but mile succeeded mile, and not a living soul did she see.

Her thoughts went to Ackroyd. What would be his reaction to this situation? If there were mules or horses at the lumber camp doubtless he would make a bid to cut off the canoe lower down the river. If not he could make an attempt to beat the canoe on foot. But from what she could see of the country on either side of them such an effort would be fruitless.

Then there was her own personal problem. Presuming—as it had to be presumed—that Billing and his companions intended getting away with the gold, they would doubtless place her in such a plight that she would be incapable of hindering them. The one risk that they ran was encountering a party of men.

All through the afternoon the canoe slipped down the broad river, driven by muscular arms, and by avaricious brains. Twice Jeff and Harry changed positions, but Billing seemed to be made of steel and stuck to his paddle without halt. It was late in the evening, when she was both thirsty and hungry, that Billing indicated a spot on the left bank, and began to drive the canoe towards it.

"Half an hour for some grub," he said. "And then on again."

She was bundled out of the canoe, and sat and watched them while they prepared a meal. It was all done with the minimum of delay, and she knew that this amazing acceleration was due to the discovery of the canoe's precious cargo. As with Ackroyd and Sinclair, so with these men. It lowered the whole sex in her eyes, and brought a rather cynical smile to her face.

"Tea," said Billing, handing her a full mug. "And there's some canned pears. Get a move on."

She drank the invigorating tea and ate some of the contents of the tin. All the while her mind was working swiftly. In any case they would most certainly land her in some lonely spot, many miles from any township. If anything was to be done to upset their dishonest scheme it must be done quickly. She thought she saw a way out. It might prove a permanent solution, or merely delay. But the one was nearly the same as the other.

When camp was struck she saw the three desperadoes whispering together. That they were discussing her she had no shadow of doubt. Ultimately they appeared to come to an agreement, and they beckoned her towards the canoe. She took up her old position, near the bows, and again the paddles commenced working.

Away went the fleet craft, bobbing like a cork on the fast current. Rock walls closed in on either side of them, and continued for some

miles. Then again these passed away and the river broadened, revealing wooded banks. Before them was a wide and beautiful bend, and Billing brought the canoe well in to the left bank in order to save time on the bend. Here was her opportunity. The canoe, terribly overloaded, was riding dangerously low. It needed but a small effort to swamp it. She suddenly put all her weight on one side of the craft. The gunwale went down to the water. Billing turned and swore savagely, while Harry aimed a blow at her.

"She's trying——!" he yelled.

Before he could finish she had achieved her purpose. The second tremendous rock brought the gunwale even lower. The water poured over it, and a few seconds later all the four occupants were in the river. She struck out for the nearer bank, and saw Billing and Harry away to her left also swimming hard for land.

On reaching the bank she waded out of the water and looked back. Billing and Harry were just about to make land some fifty yards below her, but of Jeff there was no sign at all. She gulped with horror as she concluded that Jeff was unable to swim, and was somewhere beneath the swift, dark water. Moreover, his two companions must have been aware of his plight, and callously let him drown!

Billing was running at her, with his ugly face puckered into hateful lines. It was no use fleeing, so she stayed where she was. He reached her and caught both her wrists in his enormous

hands, twisting them until she reeled under the pain. Then he flung her down, and stood over her while she nursed her aching wrists.

"I ought to have chucked you into the river long ago," he fumed. "But I wasn't wise to your game. Get up!"

She rose to her feet, and faced him.

"You thought it was easy going," she said. "You imagined I was going to sit still and do nothing. Well, there's the booty—a good twenty feet down. Better go and get it."

He raised his hand as if to hit her in the face, but Harry intervened and pushed her aside.

"I reckon Jeff's gone," he said.

"Serve him darn well right. There was one too many in on this job. We've got to get that canoe up."

"Sure! But how?"

"If we could fix a line on it——. I'm going to swim out and see what depth of water there is. Watch that ——. Don't let her run away—— yet."

He slipped off his coat and boots and dived into the river. It was a simple matter to locate the exact spot where the canoe had capsized, for there was a projecting spur of rock exactly between it and the bank. Billing sank with his hands above his head, and when his feet found bottom his hands were still visible. He came up blowing like a grampus.

"It's there," he yelled.

"Your hands wasn't covered," said Harry. "That would make it less than eight feet down."

Billing made land and shook himself like a large dog. What was needed was a strong hauling line, and the ability to attach it to the sunken canoe, but at that moment they possessed no such thing.

"There's a farm down-river," whispered Harry. "One of us had better go and——"

He was interrupted by the sharp report of a rifle not many hundred yards away. Billing stared across at him, and then at Helen, who was preparing to make in the direction of the rifle-shot.

"Stay where you are!" he snapped.

Instead of obeying she ran like a hare. The two men came after her, smashing through the undergrowth. Fleet of foot as she was the obstructions put her at a disadvantage against her more powerful pursuers. She turned her head and saw Billing gaining on her. Then a fallen pine blocked her further progress.

"Coo-ee!" she called. "Help!"

The latter word went echoing throughout the woods, and was still echoing when Billing caught her. Her free left hand went to his face in a smashing blow, and brought a growl of pain and insensate wrath.

"Help!" she screamed again.

"Take her other arm, Harry!" said Billing.

"Yank her out of this. Quick!"

They dragged her between them at a half run. Rendered breathless, she was now incapable of repeating her cry for help. Billing pointed to a narrow track that ran between the massed pines

and short scrub. Down this they went at break-neck pace, deeper and deeper into the wood. At last they stopped and listened intently.

"All right now," gasped Billing. He glared at the breathless captive. "If you open your mouth again I'll brain you."

"There's a shack of some sort yonder," said Harry. "Look—over there!"

He pointed and Billing saw the end timbers of the building.

"May belong to the fellow who's shooting," he said. "Run along and have a closer look at it."

Harry went off, and returned a few minutes later.

"Empty," he said. "Guess no one has lived in it for years. The lock on the door is broken, and there's a bit of a hole in the roof. Not a bad sort of place."

"Come on then."

Helen was jerked forward, and in a short time the party reached the shack. There was a thin layer of snow about it, and some footprints which were left by Harry. Otherwise it looked as if it had remained untenanted and unvisited for years.

"We'll risk it," said Billing.

The small timber building comprised three rooms, in the centre of which was an old iron stove. The room farthest from the door was little more than a cupboard, lacking a window, and this served Billing's purpose quite well.

"That's for you, ma'am," he said to Helen.

"You can shout 'Help!' there until the cows come home, and since you were smart enough to sink all the grub we had, you may get a bit hungry before we're through. Looks as if you wasn't quite so clever as you thought. Get in!"

She was precipitated into the box-like compartment, and the door was slammed on her. It bore a wooden bar fastening, and this Billing pushed home with gusto.

"I could strangle the wench," he muttered. "Giving us all this trouble. The next thing is rope. We can't do nothing without it. Even then it won't be no easy job diving down and fixing it. How far do you reckon that farm is?"

"Not more than five miles."

"You'd better go then. Bring as much as you can get—a hundred feet if possible. And keep your mouth closed as to what it's for."

"You must think me a sap," retorted Harry. "I'll give you a bit of advice too. Watch out for that skirt. She's clever."

"I'll deal with her. You run along. It's getting dark."

Harry nodded, wrung some water from the ends of his coat, and then went out. Billing took off his saturated coat, and took a few things from the pockets. His tobacco was useless, but his pocket petrol lighter still functioned. That was one consolation, for it meant that a fire was possible.

In the dusk of the evening he gathered some inflammable branches and set about lighting a fire. It took some time, for there was no paper

with which to start it. But at last he succeeded, and within half an hour a warm glow lay over the room. Clad in nothing but his breeches he dried the rest of his clothing.

A few yards away Helen was suffering all the miseries of close confinement, wet clothing, and uncertainty. She had overheard the conversation between Billing and Harry, and realised that in all probability they would still achieve their main object, in which case she had merely jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XXIII

FIVE miles down-river, and twenty miles above the township of La Chappelle, lay the Preston farm. It was connected with the township by river and road, and the Prestons by dint of ten years of unremitting toil had rendered it as comfortable a home and prosperous a business as could be found in the province.

Jim Preston was now fifty years of age—a pioneer type of man who would have been happy anywhere where there was good air to breathe and a chair to sit in when the day's toil was over. His son Ned was twenty-two, and as rooted to the land as his father was. The only other occupant of the house, apart from an Indian servant, was Mary Preston, two years younger than her brother.

On this evening Preston was sitting by a log

fire enjoying an old magazine which had been forwarded from England, and Mary was tinkering about with a wireless set striving to get stations far beyond the range of the instrument.

"Fireworks!" complained Preston.

"Statics, father. The air is full of them to-night."

"Why not be satisfied with the local station?"

"Oh, there's no fun in that. Ned has often got New York."

"In his imagination. But is he back yet?"

"No. I expect he's trying for that blue fox up at Crossby. I'm to have it—when he gets it."

"They'll be out of fashion by that time. Did he take the canoe?"

"Yes."

Ten minutes later Ned entered the house. He slipped the rifle from his shoulder and placed it in a corner. Preston turned his head and smiled.

"Where's the pelt, Ned?"

"No luck," replied Ned. "But I got a sight of him. That animal has got the devil in him. I can't think how I missed. Anyway he went off into the blue."

"I believe your blue fox is a myth," said Mary. "And I shouldn't be surprised if you have a secret rendezvous up there. Call it a blue fox if you like."

Ned laughed and came and sat by the fire.

"Why so thoughtful, brother?" asked Mary, as she noted his knitted brows.

"Well, a curious thing happened up there—just after the fox went off. I heard a shout—it

sounded like 'Coo-ee!' and then followed a louder cry—in a woman's voice. It said 'Help'—twice."

"Oh, Ned!"

"I wasn't dreaming. The first call might have been imagination, but the others weren't. They echoed all over the forest."

"What did you do?"

"I made towards the direction which the sound appeared to come from. But you know how difficult it is to locate sounds in thick timber. I called out once or twice, but never heard a sound. It was most uncanny. Finally I had to give up the quest and went back to the canoe."

Mary was inclined to chip her brother, but Preston knew his son better. Ned was not given to romancing, nor was he often a victim of imagination.

"Queer!" he commented. "In summer it might be a picnic party, and some girl playing the fool. But the river hasn't been open a week."

"There's the lumber camp," put in Mary.

"Twenty miles farther on, and not a woman in it. I suppose the company's steamer will be running in a day or two. Tired, Ned?"

"Not a bit. Just grimy. Guess I'll go and get a bath before we eat."

The boy moved off, but had not left the hall when the bell rang. To save time he answered the summons himself, and saw an unprepossessing personage standing outside. It was Harry, and his damp clothing were sticking to his form.

"Hello!" ejaculated Ned. "Where do you hail from? Come right in."

Harry passed through the hall and into the sitting-room.

"Sorry to butt in," he said. "I bin prospecting up north with a pal. We had a bit of bad luck with the canoe—swamped her a few miles up-river. She sank like a load o' bricks, and we're needing a length of rope to haul her out. My name's Wingate."

"Only too glad to be of assistance," said Preston. "Ned, I guess you can fix Mr. Wingate up."

"Sure! What length of rope do you want?"

"Pretty long—a hundred feet if you've got it. I'll bring it back when we come down-river—maybe to-morrow."

"I'll see what I can do," said Ned, and went off.

"Take a seat," said Preston. "Mary, you might bring that bottle of whisky, and two glasses."

Harry's eyes lighted up as the drink was poured out. It was potent stuff from a pre-War still, and he rolled his eyes as he sipped it.

"That's sure worth falling in the river for," he said.

"Well, it isn't often we have visitors at this end of the year," said Preston. "So you've been prospecting?"

"Aye, and we got caught right up in the blue. Had to wait for the river to open, and it was a toss-up whether the grub would last out."

"Well, you're all right now," said Preston. "There's a township twenty miles farther down. Did you have any luck?"

"Not so bad, but not quite what we expected. Still, we ain't complaining."

"Just two of you?"

"Yep."

Ned came back with a long coil of stout rope over his arm. He showed it to Harry, who expressed his satisfaction.

"Mighty good of you," he added.

"Not a bit. Can we give you a shake-down for the night?"

"Thank ye, but my pard would wonder what had happened. It's only a matter of five miles."

Ned shot his father a swift glance at this remark, for that distance would bring a person to the neighbourhood of his recent strange experience.

"Shall I come along and lend you a hand?" he asked.

"Oh, no. I couldn't put ye to so much——"

"But it would be no trouble."

"Thanks! I guess we can manage. If not I'll run down here in the morning."

"Very well."

"Now I'll be getting along," said Harry. "I'll bring the rope back. So long to you! Good night, miss!"

Ned showed him to the door, and then came back with his brow wrinkled. He looked at his father, and realised that he too was reflecting on the matter.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"That fellow's story?"

"Sure! Isn't it a queer coincidence that he should be going back to the place where I heard that cry for help?"

"Maybe it is," replied Preston guardedly.

"And did you notice how promptly he turned down my offer of assistance?"

"Well, yes, he was rather emphatic about it."

"A dreadful looking man," put in Mary.

"But I don't quite see why you should connect him with that cry."

"A woman doesn't scream out for help unless she is facing some sort of danger. He pretended he and his chum were alone. Well, I don't believe it, and I'm going to prove it."

"What do you mean?" asked Preston.

"I'm going up there. I can beat him to it by taking the calm water near the bank."

"There may be danger, if what you suspect is true," said Preston. "We'll go together."

"No. You're tired and not very fit. I can handle this all right. Two of us would be a crowd."

Preston stood up and made a protesting gesture, but Mary came to him and caught his arm.

"You'd better stay, father," she pleaded.

"Ned needn't do any more than attempt to ascertain if that man's story is true. Ned you'll take care, won't you?"

"I'm the most careful person alive," replied Ned. "Don't worry, pop. I know that bit of

country as well as any man up here. If there's any funny business going on I'll come right back. Perhaps there's nothing to it after all."

Preston was ultimately won over, and Ned slipped an automatic pistol in his pocket and quickly got into the canoe. He went like a ghost in the shadow of the trees that fringed the bank.

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Helen in the meantime had been suffering all the discomforts of a prisoner in a very confined space. Despite the proximity of the lighted stove the box-like room was bitterly cold, and her wet garments accentuated this. Every few minutes she was seized with a shivering fit, and her teeth chattered like castanets. At last, in desperation, she banged on the door with her clenched fists.

"Hold your noise!" roared Billing.

"I'm freezing!" she cried.

"Darn well freeze then."

She marched up and down the two yards of linear space, banging her hands on her legs, and stamping her feet in order to ward off the torturing cold. Her brain seemed uncommonly dull, and thinking became a painful process.

At long last she heard some one enter the hut, and then Billing's gruff voice. Harry made reply, and she pressed her ear close to the door in order to overhear what was said.

"That ought to do," said Billing. "If it wasn't so darned dark and cold I'd have a shot

at it now. But I guess it will have to wait until morning. What did you tell those guys at the farm ? ”

“ I said we’d lost our canoe in an accident, and that we’d return the rope to-morrow as we passed.”

“ Well, we ain’t stopping for no one.”

“ Not on your life. But what about—her ? ”

“ We’ll leave her here.”

“ What—locked up ? ”

“ No. There’s no need for that. Once we’re ready to make down-river we’ll let her out. She can’t hurt us much now.”

“ She might run straight to that farm.”

“ We’d beat her easily on this flow of water. Once we get clear of the farm we’ll sink the canoe and make across country. We can plant some of the stuff, and carry what we can handle——”

Helen’s attention was taken by a curious soft rapping on the timbers at the rear of her. At first she thought it might be some curious type of insect, but a few moments later this possibility was abandoned, for the tapping was undoubtedly done by a reasoning person—a rhythmic sequence. Amazed, she crept closer to the timbers and strove to find the exact spot.

“ Hist ! Hist ! ”

The sibilant sound came from between two massive timbers.

“ Who is it ? ” she whispered.

“ A friend. Are you a prisoner ? ”

“ Yes.”

"I thought so. How many men are there inside?"

"Two."

"Good!"

"But they are desperate scoundrels," she whispered. "I think one of them has a revolver. It may be too wet to go off, but I'm not sure about it."

"Well, I've got something that will go off with absolute certainty," he replied with a laugh. "Who are you?"

"Helen Mandison. I was the victim of——"

"Mandison! I remember that curious business. Details were broadcast on the radio. Gee, what an extraordinary discovery! Have you been with these men——?"

"No. It is a long story. I can't explain now. I am afraid they will overhear me."

"All right. I'm going round the front."

"Take care," she said.

"You bet! See you later."

Came silence, except for mutterings on the other side of the partition. She went across and listened there.

"You bin drinking," said Billing. "Where'd you get it?"

"Fellow at the farm. Wish I could have brought the whole bottle with me."

"You'd have finished it on the way if you had," snorted Billing, "and never breathed a word about it. And here am I with a terrible thirst."

"You're dry, anyway. That's more than I

am. I've got icicles all over me. Make way—I'm going to dry my clothes."

"They look dry enough."

"Frozen, you mean. Is that all the wood you've cut?"

The altercation continued for a minute or two longer, and then they were both startled by a rapping on the outer door. Before anything could be done Ned came to view.

"Who the hell——?" commenced Billing.

"Easy!" said Harry. "It's the guy from the farm who loaned us the rope."

"Howdo!" said Billing.

"I had no idea I should find you here," said Ned. "I was up here earlier in the day and left some fishing-tackle in this shack. I thought I'd run up and get it, as I want to try for a fish or two early to-morrow morning."

"There's nothing here," said Billing.

"I left it in the small room at the back, for safety. I'll get it and hurry back."

He made to go to the barred communicating door, but Billing obstructed him.

"Not a thing in there," he said, "except some gear of mine."

"Oh, but I'm certain——"

"Wal, you can take it from me it ain't there now. Somebody must have broken in and——"

He stopped suddenly as Ned produced an automatic pistol and waved it towards his obstructive form.

"I'm going inside," said Ned in a determined

voice. "And I advise you to step aside—quick!"

Helen, who had overheard all this, held her breath in suspense. The door creaked and came open. She saw a fine-looking young man standing on the threshold, with a pistol in his right hand, and Billing and his companion standing to the left. Their glances met, and Ned was momentarily taken off his guard. Billing saw his opportunity and charging at Ned shot him clean into the small room. Then the door closed with a bang and the retaining timber was forced home.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XXIV

NED recovered his balance and collided with Helen in the darkness.

"What an ass I was," he muttered bitterly. "Well, I'm going to get out of this. Hold this gun for a moment, please. Where's your hand?"

"Here."

His free hand closed on her fingers.

"You're nearly frozen," he said. "What a couple of swine!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Break through the door. I saw the wedge they used. It's half rotten. Stand away!"

Going as far back as space would permit, he charged the door like a maddened bull, and recoiled from it breathless.

"You'll hurt——" she protested.

"Hold that gun ready. Look out!"

The second attempt was more successful—too successful in fact. The wooden wedge broke off and the door gave way, precipitating the boy well into the room. He found there Billing with an ugly revolver in his hand, and Harry brandishing a log of wood.

"Jest move one inch," said Billing grimly. "and you won't move no more. Harry, get that other gun. It sure don't look pretty in a lady's hand."

Helen brandished the weapon.

"If you come a step nearer I'll fire," she said.

"What are you waiting for?" snarled Billing.

"She won't shoot. If she does Gawd help her."

"I will," she snapped. "Get out of this place, both of you, while you are safe."

"Get that gun!" roared Billing. "Then I'll deal with this young cockerel."

Harry, who was not lacking in cunning, suddenly hurled the log of wood at Helen, and followed it up in person. The heavy missile hit her full in the breast, and knocked her backwards. Harry flew at her, and while his grasping hand was within a few inches of the pistol it went off. The miscreant uttered a wail of pain, and staggered away holding his left shoulder. The pistol dropped from Helen's trembling fingers.

Billing, left to his own resources, was equal to the emergency. He put his big boot on the fallen weapon, and drove Ned and Helen into a corner. Ned made one effort to attack, but gave

up when the revolver was pressed to his chest, and he saw Billing's murderous eyes behind it.

"You've shot my pard," muttered Billing, "and you're going to pay. I'll fix you up inside so you won't get out in a hurry—and there you can rot. Get in!"

"You dirty skunk!" said Ned. "She's injured—bleeding——"

"Get in!" repeated Billing.

Helen staggered to the doorway, and Ned followed her up to assist her. Again the door was closed on them, and this time Billing fixed it in a way that offered little chance of escape. He then condescended to look at his confederate's wound. Inside the improvised prison Helen was doing her best to stifle a groan of pain. She was vaguely aware that Ned was holding her close.

"I made a shocking muck of it," he said. "I'm terribly sorry. It was all my fault."

"No. You were splendid," she stammered. "They are cunning brutes. I—I hope I didn't kill him."

"No such luck. Are you hurt much?"

"Oh, no—not seriously. I shall be all right—soon."

"Rats in a trap now," he muttered. "They'll leave us here to starve. But it won't be as bad as that, because my father knows where I went. Why did they want that rope?"

"To refloat a sunken canoe—one they stole from a friend of mine. It contains a big quantity of gold-dust."

" Ah ! I understand now. I knew that fellow was lying. How did you get into their clutches ? "

" I tried to prevent them from getting away with the canoe, and they dragged me aboard. When I realised they would succeed in their scheme unless something was done I capsized the canoe. "

" And your friend ? "

" He is back there—in the lumber camp. "

" A man ? "

" Yes. He saved me when my airplane crashed. A man named Ackroyd. "

" But how have you managed to live all through the winter ? "

" He had a shack—far away from anywhere. "

" And you——? "

A curious little sigh left her lips, and this was followed by dead silence. The weight on his supporting arm increased.

" Miss Mandison ! "

That she had fainted was obvious, and he felt keenly his helplessness. Lifting her in his arms he placed her on the floor, with her back against the wall, and then searched for matches. The feeble light revealed a horrid sight—blood on him and her, and a pallid still face.

" Damn them ! " he muttered angrily.

The exact nature of her injury he hesitated to explore, until he cast aside pruriency, and got down to hard facts. Another match revealed a deep and jagged wound under the left breast. It was bleeding profusely, and all he could do at

the moment was to make a soft and absorbent pad with his neckerchief.

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Ackroyd in the meantime had been putting forth all the energy of which he was capable. His last sight of Billing's jeering face, as the canoe drew away, aroused in him the most violent antipathy. Apart from the threat to his cherished gold, there was Helen to be considered.

To go back up the hill to the camp and beg the assistance of the foreman was out of the question, for every minute was of the greatest value. Emerging from the ice-cold water he gazed about him, but saw no craft of any kind along the water-front. Only one course was open to him—pursuit on foot, and he took this without a moment's hesitation.

For the first half-mile the going was easy, and his dog-trot finally brought him within sight of the canoe. From between the spruce-trees on the high left bank he saw the craft moving swiftly down the river. But here he encountered almost insuperable obstacles, and while he scrambled over massive rocks the canoe disappeared again. Very soon he was aware that his progress was much slower than that of the canoe, and every moment slowed him down more and more. At one point it was necessary to climb over three hundred feet, along a dangerous ledge, where a false step would have precipitated him into the river.

Bruised and breathless he overcame this

obstacle, only to reach another even worse climb within five minutes. He rested for a few moments and decided that the river offered better chances than the land, and he thereupon made his way through low brush to the river's edge.

Taking the water, he swam out into midstream and commenced a powerful overarm stroke, which, helped by the swift current, was conducive to fast progress. For over half an hour he endured the stinging cold of the water, and finally emerged on the opposite bank to that which he had first taken. Here the land was more even, and such obstructions as there were were not difficult to overcome. All the while he kept his gaze on the river, hoping, in the longer reaches, to bring the canoe within sight.

But this hope proved vain, and a little mental arithmetic convinced him that he was at least half an hour behind the canoe, and still losing ground. It never entered his mind to turn back. Ultimately the gang must eat and rest. They would doubtless imagine that they had thrown off any possibility of pursuit, and might waste precious hours in sleep. For himself he needed no rest, and was prepared to go on until sheer exhaustion overwhelmed him.

All afternoon the pace was kept up. Again and again he encountered hold-ups. His ankles and shins were bruised by impact with rocks and half-hidden tree-stumps, his clothing torn, and his hands bleeding from groping through thick bush. Evening found him as hungry as a wolf but not a whit less determined. Tightening up

his belt he went on, scanning the river whenever he had a full view of it.

It was nearly dark when he came upon the first signs of the party since that brief glance miles farther back. The smell of burning wood was wafted to him. Never was any odour more welcome. His knowledge of woodcraft led him unerringly to the source of the smell, and he found a smouldering camp-fire and a few old tins scattered about. Near the river he found foot-prints, and amongst them a set of very small ones, which could only have been made by a woman. These were now hardening in the cold air, and he judged they had been made within the last half-hour. But as before the river was empty, and the declining sun was throwing long shadows.

Off he went again at a dog-trot. It mattered not that this business of eating indicated that a further long river-journey was in prospect. It was his powers of endurance against theirs, and he was backing himself because of the high stakes he was playing for. But the next half-hour brought disappointment. He encountered almost impassable barriers. Again he took the water, only to emerge ten minutes later, shivering with cold, and facing mountains of rock.

There was nothing to be done but to climb, and he went to it like an automaton, gasping for breath, and cursing at intervals. The desire for food and sleep was now a torture, but it had to be fought down. To harden his determination

he reflected upon the past—the three years during which he had hunted for the treasure which had now been taken from him—the threat of failure to carry out his resolution. Then there was Helen. He didn't want to think about her, but she came into his thoughts, to such an extent that he was soon near to forgetting the other matter. This was a revelation to him, for he had persuaded himself that she was but a secondary consideration.

To some extent she had knocked to pieces his condemnation of her sex—given the lie to most of his preconceptions. That she had courage he knew full well, and he had a sneaking regard for her idealism. How she could talk too, when the mood was on her ! Of course he had to readjust his ideas in the face of this new experience, but all the same he was averse from letting her think that she, or any of her kind, could exert an influence over him.

Such complex thoughts occupied his mind while his weary body broke through the opposing bush. It was now dark, but he could see things fairly well, for his eyes were like a cat's. The empty river was running under the stars, emitting a strange efflorescence. The cold smote down from above, but he did not feel it, for his gigantic energy caused his body to perspire at every pore. What he looked for now was not a canoe, but the gleam of a camp-fire.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a distant report. He knew it to be the sound of a firearm in an enclosed place, and it appeared to come

from immediately ahead of him. Stealthily he went forward, and at last he was rewarded by seeing a lighted window about thirty yards ahead of him. He went first to the river-bank to see if his canoe was there, but found instead an empty one of quite a different brand.

This was disappointing, for it looked as if the occupant of the hut was an innocent person. On the other hand, here was a chance to borrow the canoe, and follow the miscreants while resting his weary limbs. With this object in view he hurried across to the hut. A glance through the window caused him to change his mind, for inside he saw Billing leaning over Harry, who was obviously wounded. At his rear was a door stoutly barred with a log of wood, and on the corner of the table a revolver.

A sigh of great relief escaped him as his mind took in these significant facts. In all probability behind that barred door was Helen. He drew his revolver, crept to the door, and then suddenly pushed it open. But Billing was nothing if not alert. At the first sound of the opening door he leapt away from his wounded partner and seized the weapon from the table. Ackroyd could have shot him dead where he stood, but instead of firing he rushed in and seized his man.

Clasped breast to breast the two men swayed and gasped as each fought for mastery. Ultimately both firearms were abandoned. The table went slithering across the room and finally fell on its side. Fierce blows were exchanged, punctuated with low curses. Then came a heavy

fall, and a terrific scuffle on the floor. Harry made an attempt to reach one of the revolvers, but was rendered absolutely *hors de combat* by one of Ackroyd's feet.

At last Billing's efforts began to weaken. Ackroyd found his throat and commenced to throttle him. Only when Billing's eyes began to bulge ominously did he desist. Already he had noticed the coil of rope in the corner. He left the gasping man, seized the rope, and within two minutes had Billing as helpless as a trussed fowl.

"Blast you!" roared Billing, as soon as he recovered his breath.

"What have you done with my canoe?"

"Go to hell!"

Ackroyd turned to Harry, but that worthy was quite incapable of saying a word. Then came a loud rapping on the barred door. Ackroyd dashed away some blood from his mouth and removed the bar. From the interior came Ned, who gaped to see this strange form.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name's Ackroyd."

"Ackroyd! Thank God you came. Miss Mandison is in here—injured——"

Ackroyd strode past him, picked up Helen in his arms and carried her into the larger room. His face wore an ugly scowl as he examined her injury.

"Who did this?" he demanded.

"The fellow yonder. He threw a piece of wood at her. She's coming to, isn't she?"

"Yes."

Helen opened her eyes and blinked at the unaccustomed light given by the stove, which Ackroyd had poked into a blaze. Then her gaze became riveted on the familiar hard face.

"Garth!"

"I got here," he said. "You've got a nasty wound. I'll have to attend to it, but not here."

"I'm all right," she said, forcing a smile.

"Stay still!" he said impatiently. "I'll fix up a temporary bandage. You'll have to have a stitch or two put in later. Where is the canoe?"

"Sunk."

"What!"

"I sank it—to prevent them getting away."

"I see."

He made no further comment, but got on with his job with his habitual alacrity and skill. When he was finished she felt decidedly easier.

"Where's the nearest house?" he asked.

"Five miles down-river, where I live," replied Ned. "I've got a good-sized canoe moored under the trees. We can make it in less than an hour."

"We'll go."

"What about these bozos?"

"I'll come up later for them, and hand them over to the police. The wounded man is incapable of moving from where he is, and he won't hurt for a few hours. As for the other brute——"

"I'll get you for this," interrupted Billing, wrestling furiously with his bonds.

"I think you would be safer separated from

your devoted companion," said Ackroyd. " He might find strength enough to set you free. Lend me a hand with the wounded man, will you ? "

Harry was carried by Ned and Ackroyd into the small room, and the door was fastened on him. Having made sure that the blaspheming Billing was secure, Ackroyd suggested going down-river. Once more he was the doctor, concerned only with the welfare of his patient.

On the way down explanations were given by both sides, and finally they landed at the farm. Preston and his daughter were all excitement. A bedroom was prepared for Helen, and some fine gut and a suitable needle were found for Ackroyd.

" It's going to hurt a bit," he said. " But it's necessary."

She nodded, and the operation went forward. It was over very quickly, and Mary Preston came in to tuck her up for the night.

" Fancy you being Helen Mandison," she said. " We heard all about the accident—your going off with the vaccine and crashing right up in the mountains. They found the remains of the plane, but couldn't find you. Your people will be overwhelmed—— But I mustn't talk any more. Doctor Ackroyd told me not to. Good night—and sleep well. To-morrow you will be able to send news to your people."

Doctor Ackroyd! How strange the term sounded. Helen could not suppress a smile as she recalled the past. Only at such moments as

this did his professional training and love of the work that was interrupted override that other part of his nature—the part which reduced him to insignificance. Then her mind turned to Ned Preston—that good-looking impetuous youth who had held her in his arms and looked at her so admiringly. Ackroyd had never looked at her like that, and she doubted that he ever would. For him there was no need of love—of women. One gigantic desire ruled him, and that desire, she felt, was near to being realised.

How cool and restful were the sheets after months of prickly blankets ! How good it was to feel that her father's terrible anxiety would be eased within twenty-four hours. After that home, and the blessed reunion. Quite unwittingly she would be the lion of the moment. What a marvellous story it would make, did she feel like writing it ; but such a thing was remote from her thoughts.

Came sleep at last—deep sleep that did not end until the sun was well up and shining into the room. She saw Mary Preston quite close to her, smiling.

“ I opened the shutters,” she confessed. “ I wanted you to wake naturally. How do you feel ? ”

“ Not at all ill.”

“ That's fine. Brother Ned and Doctor Ackroyd——”

“ Mr. Ackroyd.”

“ But isn't he really a doctor ? ”

“ Not quite.”

"Well, anyway, they were up most of the night. They took those two awful ruffians down to the township and got a hire car back. What a thrilling adventure!"

"Where is Ackroyd now?"

"Gone with Ned to salve the canoe."

"But he doesn't know where it lies."

"The wounded man told him—I don't know why. They went off two hours ago. Ackroyd told me to tell you that he had left a telegram at the township, to be sent to your father, telling him the news."

Mary insisted that she should have breakfast in bed, and she was propped up between two soft pillows, with a view through the window up-river.

"I'm a fraud," she protested. "I am going to get up after breakfast."

"Not on your life," retorted Mary. "I promised Ackroyd I wouldn't let that happen."

"He isn't really my doctor, and I am under no obligation to obey him."

"I should if I were in your place," said Mary slyly. "He is rather nice, isn't he?"

She shot the girl a swift glance, feeling that this was but an attempt to "draw her." But she was not in the mood to comply, and merely inclined her head. An hour later she saw a canoe coming down-river. It was riding low, and in it were two men. One she had no difficulty in recognising as Ackroyd. The other was Ned, without a doubt. It passed from her view at last, and she guessed that Ackroyd would soon be with her.

Ten minutes passed and then he was shown in by Mary. His eyes were uncommonly bright, and a smile played round the corners of his mouth. Mary seemed to deduce that her presence was not necessary, and beat a retreat. Ackroyd came forward and sat by the bed.

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XXV

“WELL,” he demanded, “how’s the patient?”

“I’m all right. There was never much wrong with me. I was more cold and miserable than hurt.”

“It was a nasty little wound. A doctor from the township will come up and see you to-day. I have arranged it.”

“Why?”

“I have no qualifications. Besides, I have other business to attend to.”

She looked at him fixedly.

“You salved the canoe?”

“Yes. Ned lent me a hand. A nice boy that.”

“Is everything intact?”

“Not everything. Those scoundrels threw some things overboard—among which was my medicine-chest. Still, I mustn’t complain. All’s well that ends well.”

“You are satisfied with this ending?”

“Yes. Aren’t you?”

"Quite," she lied. "It was good of you to think of the telegram to my father. I expect he or my brother will take the next train west."

"I wish I could stay and meet them," he said. "But it is impossible."

"You mean—you are leaving at once?"

"In a few minutes."

"So you really came to say good-bye."

"Yes."

Something seemed to swell up in her throat. She told herself it was ridiculous—childish and illogical. What more had she expected than this? She had not changed him. Nothing had changed.

"I suppose you will go to Montreal?" she asked.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Isn't that a natural deduction?"

"Yes, perhaps it is. You know, it doesn't seem long ago now since we met, in that very unconventional fashion."

"To me it seems a lifetime."

"As bad as that? Yet you shouldn't regret it. It isn't every woman who can lay claim to an experience of that sort."

"What sort?"

"Danger, adventure. I think life was meant to be led at full pressure. You never know what sort of a creature you are until you are compelled to face up to novel situations. You're a bigger and better woman than you were, Helen Mandison, and you can't deny it."

"I've learned to face hard facts."

"Yes, and that's better than living and dying in an artificial world."

"But one doesn't necessarily have to imbibe that artificiality."

"You can't help it. All around you are its products—its stereotyped women and spineless men, its pleasant platitudes and endless lies. That place up the river had none of that about it. I took you for what you were—a woman, and not a damned dressed-up doll."

"I don't think you ever knew, or will know, a single thing about me," she retorted. "You were too immersed in your own person and problems."

"Is this going to degenerate into one of our customary altercations?"

"Why not? That's our usual mode of conversation—a scratch from me and a bite from you."

"I'm glad you put it in the right sequence."

"Only because I still lay claim to being civilised."

"You'll get over it."

"Over what?"

"The sickness of body and soul called civilisation."

"I dislike you most when you are cynical," she said. "Garth, why must you behave like a barbarian? Are you quite outside a last and despairing appeal?"

"From you?"

"Yes."

"I think so. But say what you like."

"You are pleased now that you have got what you want?"

"But I haven't."

"You know what I mean. Why don't you drop it, Garth? This plan of yours can bring you no real peace of mind. It is going to cost you more than you can possibly pay——"

"You don't understand——"

"But I do. Sometimes I wish I had let those two scoundrels get away with the gold. But I couldn't do it. That would have been treachery. In all probability we shall never meet again, and this is my last word——"

"I don't want to hear it."

"You are afraid?"

"Yes—terrified. Now let me see if those clumsy stitches of mine are holding."

He was satisfied that all was well with her, and then he tucked her in with a curious smile on his face.

"You'll need a few days' rest," he said. "The doctor will take out the stitches at the right moment. Give my kind regards to your brother and father, and don't forget the lessons I taught you."

"You have taught me nothing," she retorted. "Except to hold fast to my old ideas of men."

"Well, that's something," he replied calmly. "Don't get excited. It will do you no good. May I drop you a line from Montreal?"

"No."

"Not even to say that I arrived there safely?"

" I think it would be better not to."

" Very well. Good-bye ! "

She turned on her side away from him, but she could see his shadow on the wall. He raised the tips of his fingers to his lips and then moved towards the door. She wanted to call his name and bring him back, to tell him that her recent denial was untrue, that the great thing he had taught her could never be forgotten, and that without him life would be a hideous, useless thing. But the old stubborn pride prevailed, and she heard the door close.

" Garth ! "

She turned round swiftly, and brought a twinge of pain to her breast. For a second or two she stared dumbly at the closed door, and then commenced to cry softly.

To the very last he had been true to resolution. Not all her pleadings could move him. The old obsession had beaten finer emotions. Apparently he did not even know that she loved him, and that because she loved him she despised the mean object that was taking him away from her. That same purposeful desire in some other man might have called forth sympathy, but not with this man. Love as she knew it was idealistic. It should be big enough to overrule all other considerations. Obviously he was not even touched by it. It was a bitterly disappointing ending.

Mary came in a few minutes later, to find the patient looking curiously pensive, and with eyes that seemed unnaturally red. She informed

Helen that Ackroyd had left in the canoe, and that he had stated he was going to Montreal.

"Such a hustler," she said. "I think he might at least have waited to see your father."

"Why?"

"Well they would wish to thank him, wouldn't they?"

"I don't think he wishes to be thanked."

"It seems a pity, somehow."

One thing was clear to Helen—Mary was already half in love with Ackroyd, and her concern about his quick departure was entirely personal. In the circumstances Helen could afford to smile.

That evening brought a note of excitement to the quiet farm. An airplane came in from the east and made a perfect landing in front of the house. In it was Mandison and his son. Helen had heard the engine from her room, and its meaning was clear to her. But she had not expected her father, who had always shown an aversion from flying. They burst into her room a few minutes later.

There were a few emotional moments, during which some tears were spilt, and when the tension was over hundreds of questions were hurled at her, the majority of which went unanswered. They had already heard about Ackroyd. Where was he? Surely he would give them an opportunity to express their gratitude.

"He's gone," she said. "I don't think we shall ever see him again. He hates a lot of fuss."

"It all seems too good to be true," said Alan. "When your wrecked plane—I mean my wrecked plane—was found, we had several airmen out looking for you. Curious they never saw that shack."

"It would be difficult to see from above. But I heard a plane—saw it in fact—and tried to get into the open where I could be seen. But I was too late."

"We gave up all hope after the air survey," said Mandison. "One of the pilots found the plane. There was nothing worth salvaging."

"How did it happen?" asked Alan.

"I hit an eagle. The impact must have broken the propeller, for everything went wrong. I didn't remember anything after I crashed, until I found myself in an Indian canoe being paddled up the river."

"But I thought it was Ackroyd——"

"He turned up later."

"And took you from them?"

"Scarcely that. He was obliged to do a deal with them, and exchanged a mule for me."

"Good heavens! What a transaction!" said Alan.

"A little embarrassing, I agree. It was that which made the position difficult, for without the mule the problem of getting home was intensified. A number of other circumstances combined to make a start impossible until the spring."

"What a terrible experience!" said Mandison.

"It wasn't so bad," she protested. "The

worst thing about it was the thought of your anxiety."

"And how did you come by this wound?" asked Alan.

"Hasn't Ned told you?"

"He mentioned something about a fight with some scoundrels who had stolen Ackroyd's canoe."

"The details must wait," she said. "It is rather a long story. But how good to see you both again! I thought it was possible Alan might come by air, but not you, father."

"It was awful," said Mandison. "I wouldn't go back in that thing for a fortune."

"That's too bad," protested Alan. "The new plane is a beauty, and the only trouble we had was an air pocket——"

"Pocket, ye call it!" snorted Mandison. "Why, the darn plane dropped a good five hundred feet like a stone, and then bumped like hitting a rock. All this young murderer did was to laugh."

"No one could help it," said Alan. "Pop's face was a study in utter hopelessness. You'd have loved it, Helen."

"I wonder whether I should?"

Mary entered somewhat breathlessly to announce that the doctor has just arrived, and Mandison and Alan took this as a gentle hint that they must leave.

"Come back afterwards," pleaded Helen.

"Why, of course," replied Alan. "Father is staying the night, and I shall probably stay

until you are fit enough to fly back with me. Here he comes ! ”

They left the room as the doctor entered. He was old and worn, but efficient, though slow. The wound was laid bare, and he examined Ackroyd's handiwork with professional thoroughness.

“ H'm ! Holding well,” he said. “ An amazingly good piece of work for an amateur.”

“ He isn't exactly an amateur.”

“ Indeed ! ”

“ No, he studied medicine and is awfully clever. Something prevented him from taking his diploma.”

“ Well, there is nothing to worry about here. I'll re-dress it and then you must lie up for a few days.”

“ Oh, but I want——”

“ It is absolutely necessary. What is the hurry ? This is a nice, sunny, peaceful room.”

“ My brother and father have called for me. I was hoping I could leave to-morrow.”

He laughed and made it quite evident that he would not give her permission to do that. When he had finished and gone Mandison and Alan returned.

“ I've to stay here for some days,” she complained. “ It is such nonsense, when I feel perfectly fit.”

“ Old Sawbones is right,” said Alan. “ Anyway, what does it matter ? Pop will have to go back to look after things, but I guess a few days here won't do me any harm. Young Preston

tells me there is good fishing in the river, and he has half a dozen rods. I've also undertaken to give him a flight in 'Nimrod the Second'."

"What extravagance to buy another plane!" protested Helen. "You always said we couldn't afford the other one."

"Neither could we, but every one is buying things they can't afford. As a matter of fact, this machine was bought second-hand at a knock-out price. The insurance company paid up on the old one, and I was able to retain a hundred pounds of the money. But what did old Sawbones say?"

"He complimented Ackroyd upon his skill."

"Pity he wasn't here to hear it," said Mandison. "Hasn't he an address to which we can write?"

Helen shook her head.

"What sort of a man was he?" asked Alan.

"Just—ordinary," she stammered.

"What an eloquent description!" laughed Alan. "Was he old?"

"Oh, no—quite young."

"A trapper, or prospector?"

"A prospector, I suppose you would call him," she demurred. "But why worry?"

"Quite right," agreed Mandison. "Don't plague her with questions, Alan. There'll be lots of time for all the details when she is home again. Let us be satisfied it has ended this way."

She could not refrain from smiling at this remark—an echo of Ackroyd. Apparently every one was satisfied, except herself, and possibly

Mary Preston, who by no means liked Ackroyd's sudden departure out of the picture.

On the following morning Mandison came up to say good-bye, and Mary started to carry out her nursing duties. She talked all the time she was present, until Helen grew tired of the sound of her rather high-pitched voice.

"So glad your brother is staying," she chirped. "We hear he was in the War, and it's always nice to hear about it first-hand."

"You won't get much from Alan," warned Helen. "The War is the one thing he hates to talk about."

"Was Mr. Ackroyd in the War?"

"I don't know," said Helen, and felt like adding, "And I don't care."

"There, how is that?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you!"

She was glad to be left alone and to be able to turn over in her mind all the incidents that had led up to this finale. Through the window she could see glimpses of the river and the distant forest through which she had recently come. Away on the skyline were the mountains, still bearing snow. Somewhere in their confines was Ackroyd's shack, the myriad local scenes that were burned deep in her memory. It would be still now up there—as still as the grave.

The roar of an engine outside caused her to conclude that Ned was taking his promised flight, and later she saw the plane pass the window. Came a desire to be up and doing—an active, useful creature once again; but she knew

it was useless to think and fret about her position.

When next she saw Ned he was full of enthusiasm for flying, and for Alan's skill as a pilot. Apparently he had inveigled Alan into "looping" and performing several other stunts, but had found all of them far less thrilling than he had imagined.

"It is like that," she said. "The lure about it is not the cheap thrill of being whirled through the air, but the feeling of exultation it brings. But to get it at full pressure you have to be handling the machine."

"I mean to, if ever this terrible trade depression passes. When are you going to get up?"

"To-morrow, I hope."

"Splendid! I want to show you round the old place."

But three more days were to elapse before she was permitted to leave her room. Then came quick convalescence—the sensation of health pouring into her body from some mysterious source. Apart from her accident she had needed rest, and she emerged like a phoenix, active and eager.

Yet behind her radiant physical health was a shadow which at times dulled the brightness of her eyes. Alan was aware of this, but was not quite sure of the cause, and being by nature discreet he made no reference to this change in her.

She found in Ned an excellent companion. While Alan seized an opportunity to dismantle

the engine of his new toy, and tinker with every bit of mechanism, she and Ned went up the river on excursions. The boy was a lovable specimen of youth. All his life had been spent at the farm in the foothills, and it had bred in him a cleanliness of body and spirit. But with him, as with many other youths of the new era, was the urge to go deeper into the fight of life.

"Farming is all right," he said. "But it doesn't seem to lead anywhere, even at its best. Now we are faced with the most appalling depression, and here am I—— Sometimes I envy the men who make things—like that plane—and get to know the secrets of science. Of course I dare not tell father this. He believes in the land, and expects me to marry—one day—and settle down here. But I've been thinking——"

"Yes."

"I seem to be missing so much."

"I don't think you are, Ned. Look at all this—the sunshine, the peaceful river, the cattle and crops. Look at yourself—young, strong, abundantly healthy, and—I might say—good-looking. You've a lot to be grateful for."

"That's just it. I don't want to appear ungrateful, but—— Oh, I wish I could explain."

"Isn't it the reigning spirit of discontent that is sweeping the world just now? The thing is contagious. We all get dissatisfied, and hand it on. Is there a single soul who isn't prone to it at times?"

"Yes, your brother."

"You have to remember that Alan went through hell for four years, that he came back with his mind full of appalling horrors, and his body full of wounds. He found home the best place in the world, and the open air, and the sunshine, and the peaceful prairie God-blessed things. Alan has no illusions. I oughtn't to say it since he is my brother, but he is the happiest and the finest man I have ever met, and chiefly because he asks nothing better of life than the right to give service."

"My word, you can preach," he replied, with a smile. "Are you telling me to stick to farming?"

"I am."

"Then I suppose I shall have to. Look, you've got a bite. Careful—careful!"

Exultantly she finally landed a two-pound trout, whose scaly body shone like a rainbow in the sunlight. Then again they talked—about life and youth and many things. All the while she felt she was being most subtly wooed, and while this pleased her it discomfited her. Once he caught her hand and held it. She had to submit because of her deep affection for him, but she promised herself that she would leave her sanctuary as quickly as possible, before the boy's passions mastered him completely.

When she was alone she reflected upon this matter. Why could she not feel a real response to Ned's advances? Why was her heart completely dead to him? There was so much in him that could not fail to appeal to any healthy,

normal girl ; and yet neither his touch nor his frequent compliments aroused in her the slightest thrill. Had Ackroyd merely said half the things that Ned had said, with a quarter of his intensity, she would have been overwhelmed. Why was she fool enough to let this fine-looking, generous boy waste his words on the air, and nurture a secret longing for the man who had exchanged a mule for her, and regretted it ?

Ned on his part was dreaming wild dreams, for which there was no justification whatever. Alan was quick to understand what was happening, and tried on occasion to sugar the pill that Ned must ultimately swallow, for to him it was as clear as daylight that his sister had no other feeling for Ned than that of friendship.

"Curious chap—Ackroyd," said Ned one morning. "Do you know, he had that canoe plumb full of gold-dust ? Heaven only knows where he dug that out."

"Helen might know."

"I don't think so. Anyway, she never refers to it. At first I thought——"

He hesitated as if he feared to go on, but Alan had his own reasons for encouraging him.

"What did you think ? " he asked.

"That she was in love with him."

"What made you think that ? "

"Her curious behaviour when he was near her, and of course one had to remember that they were together the whole winter. It seems impossible that any man could see so much of her and not fall in love with her ; and yet——"

"Go on."

"I can't understand why he should go away—apparently for good—if that was the case."

"It wasn't," replied Alan emphatically. "Of course I have no means of knowing what Ackroyd's attitude was, as I have never seen him. But I know my sister."

"Is she immune from natural passions?"

"Not at all, but she would prove to be about as hard to win as Paradise. Any man who brought off an event like that with Helen would have to be a combination of Don Juan, Socrates, and an Archangel. Her standard is so hopelessly high that ordinary human beings with all their faults and failings simply couldn't stand the pace. Apart from this I don't think she is a marrying sort of girl at all."

Ned looked rather depressed at this remark, and Alan felt slightly ashamed, knowing it was far from the truth. What he wanted to do was to soften the blow which he felt must fall very soon. Taking his courage in his hands he tackled Helen herself.

"Are you aware you are causing a disturbance here?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing meteorological—psychical."

"Why speak in parables?"

"I won't. It's young Ned. He is falling madly in love with you. Do you know that?"

"Yes," she said huskily. "I wish I could have prevented him from doing that."

"I have tried to drop a fatherly hint that

there is nothing doing, but I doubt if he will heed it."

"How do you know?" she retorted.

"That he will not heed my warning?"

"No. That there is no hope for him."

"Well, is there?"

She sighed and shook her head.

"Then why all this hedging?"

"I hate to be reminded of it. I would do anything to spare him disappointment. I didn't want that to happen."

"Well, it has happened."

"You don't mean—he told you?"

"Oh, no, but he has been pumping me about Ackroyd."

She gave an irrepressible start at this remark, and stared straight into her brother's eyes.

"Why should he do that? I mean how dare he——?"

"Helen! The way you are behaving one would imagine Ned wasn't far off the mark."

"What nonsense we are talking. There's no one—and I don't think there ever can be. I want to leave to-morrow. To stay here longer would be unkind."

"Are you sure you are fit enough?"

"Yes. May I tell Preston we are leaving?"

"As you wish."

"I will then—at once."

This decision was made known to Preston and Mary. They expressed genuine regret, and hoped that she would come and see them again some day. Ned came in and heard the news.

His glance went to Helen, who smiled and strove to appear calm.

"I don't know how to thank you for your wonderful hospitality," she said. "You have all made me feel just as if I were at home."

"That is the best reward you can give us," said Preston. "It has been a pleasure to have you here. We don't have many guests, and it has been a great treat for Mary and Ned."

Mary smiled, and Ned's mouth quivered as he made some conventional remark. For the rest of the day the boy was missing, but Alan had seen him and spoken to him.

"Taking it rather badly," he said. "But he'll get over it."

Came the day of departure. They said their final good-byes to Preston and his daughter, but Ned was not to be seen.

"I think he went along the river," said Mary. "How foolish, when I told him you were nearly ready to take-off."

"I'll find him," said Helen, and went off at once.

She went straight to the old willow which overhung the river, where she and Ned had sat and yarned on more than one occasion. As she expected, he was there, throwing stones into the swift water.

"Ned!"

He gave a violent start, and stood up.

"We have been looking for you everywhere. My brother is ready to take-off. I want to say good-bye."

"I know," he muttered.

"Then why——?"

He looked at her tensely, and all his shyness departed. At last he was the man—the lover. Words that had long been echoing through his brain now fell from his lips.

"I love you. That is why I didn't want to say good-bye. Ever since I first saw you—in that tumbledown shack—I have thought of nothing but you. Must it be good-bye, Helen? I mean for good?"

"I am afraid so," she said, much moved.
"But I shall never forget your kindness."

"Kindness! Why, I have given nothing. It is you who have given everything. Until you came I thought I was happy, but now I know that there can never be any happiness——"

"Ned," she interrupted chokingly, "you are making it dreadfully hard for me."

"You mean—it is only a wild dream of mine?"

"I value your friendship, Ned."

"Friendship isn't enough."

"It must be."

"Then—then there is some one else?"

She remained silent.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was caddish. I had no right to ask that."

"I don't mind," she replied. "There is no one else—and there never can be any one."

"But I don't understand."

"Don't try," she begged. "Write to me sometimes, and tell me how you are getting on."

"You mean that?" he asked, brightening visibly.

"Of course. There is no one I would rather hear from."

"All right. I guess I've been a bit of an ass—thinking I could win a girl like you in five minutes."

"I think you are capable of winning far better girls than I in less than that time," she replied, with a smile. "Now come, and give us a send-off."

They hurried back to the plane. Ned made a rather thin excuse, and ultimately Helen entered the plane. It took off beautifully and soared up and up into the blue. The delectable farm seemed to be running away from them at colossal speed. They were homeward bound—at last.

"By gosh, you'll get some reception, Helen!" shouted Alan.

She did not hear. Her heart was beating almost painfully in her breast. But for Garth Ackroyd, Ned's appeal might have had very different results. It seemed to her that this man had stepped into her life, only to trample on it at the end. Even love was now denied her, for she had given almost all she had to give to an ideal which she was fast coming to believe could never be made a reality.

THREE weeks had passed since Helen's return home, and they had been full enough of events. The Press, hard-up for more sensational matter, were prepared to make a story out of her adventure. As a result she was bombarded both by letters and reporters in person. The latter were a most persistent tribe, and gave her very little peace. Failing to get anything in the nature of a story, they put their imaginations to work, and produced so-called authentic versions which aroused her deepest resentment.

Then it all passed, like a seven days' wonder, and blessed peace was ushered in. The old quiet life was resumed, but it was only to outward view that things were the same. The girl who rode about the ranges and went on mad altitude flights in Alan's machine was a vastly different creature. To her father's—and brother's—inquisitive inquiries about Ackroyd she invariably made the same response. She knew very little about him, except that he had once been a medical student. Yes, he had been kind and considerate, as men go, but was a brusque sort of fellow who never indulged in confidences. It was difficult to refrain from blushing at these half-truths, but to go further would have been dangerous. What she wanted most was to cover up the fact that she had been mad enough to love this man.

But to a man of Mandison's perception such a

masquerade was foredoomed to failure. He missed her cheerful composure, the lilt of her voice—all the little things connected with her that were part and parcel of the home.

"Can't make Helen out," he confided to his son. "She looks well enough, and yet she behaves as if home had no longer any attraction. I hope she isn't contracting any sort of wanderlust."

"I should have thought her experience would have produced the opposite effect," argued Alan. "It couldn't have been any joke living in a shack all through the winter."

"That man—Ackroyd—we know nothing about him."

"Now, father," said Alan, "for heaven's sake don't start a hare of that sort. You know Helen——"

"Yep, and I know life," retorted Mandison.

Then came a post card addressed to Helen. It bore the briefest message :

' Everything going fine.—G. A.'

Neither of the two men could avoid seeing this, for it was in bold handwriting. Alan looked at his father, who was scowling in a manner quite unusual for him.

"That's the fellow," he muttered. "Post marked Montreal."

"Helen knows quite a number of people in Montreal," argued Alan.

"Name one with those initials."

Alan shrugged his shoulders, and made no

response. When Helen saw the post card she made no comment, and the matter was considered taboo. But to Helen the message was eloquent enough. It meant that Ackroyd was busy pursuing his quest, and this was to ram home the fact that he was aloof from appeals on her part.

The following week produced a coincidence in the shape of an invitation from a friend in Montreal whom she had not seen since she left school.

"Ruth Atherton," she said. "She wants me to spend a few days with her."

"Shall you go?" asked Alan.

"I don't know."

"I should."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"A change would do you good. I'll fly you down, if you like."

"I'll think it over."

She persuaded herself that it would be nice to see Ruth again, and chat over old times. No doubt there would be a certain amount of welcome social life—theatres and a reception or two—since Ruth loved that sort of thing. But all the time she was aware she was lying to herself. The magnet that was drawing her was not Ruth nor the charming house in which she lived, but the fact that Ackroyd had written from that same city.

While every sensible argument that she could think of was against accepting the invitation, she wrote and accepted it, and then marvelled at

her own madness. What good purpose could it serve, even if she saw Ackroyd again? All they had to say had been said. That last message of his closed the chapter completely, and yet here she was packing feverishly.

"How long shall you be away?" asked Mandison.

"Not more than a week. That will be sufficient to bore me. But I should like to see Ruth again."

"Naturally."

The trip was made at close on ninety miles an hour under the most perfect conditions. Alan stayed the night at the Atherton house, which lay well out of town, and then returned to work. Helen was taken to the bosom of the warm-hearted Atherton family.

As soon as she saw Ruth she felt dowdy, for Ruth made a fetish of dress, and to do her justice possessed excellent taste in that feminine sphere, and in addition an excellent figure. Atherton was a successful surgeon who had married a wife with a very substantial income of her own, and their home—Mapledene—was invariably the resort of artistic and other interesting people.

It was rumoured that Mrs. Atherton was looking round for a suitable husband for her daughter, preferably one with a title, but Ruth had her own private ideas on this matter, and confessed to Helen that she had not the slightest intention of being hitched to a man for years and years and years.

"I should hate it," she said. "Men these days are an emasculated crowd. I should find it one long purgatory. Mother's English you know. That's why I was presented at Court. Awful expense it was too. I would rather have had the money as extra dress-allowance, but mother loved it. Now tell me all about that marvellous adventure of yours."

"It was all in the newspapers."

"Not all. Any fool could see that it was all garbled. What really happened?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that I was caught by the winter, and had to stay there until the snow went."

"And the man?"

"Oh, the prospector?"

"Yes, Ackroyd—wasn't that his name?"

"Yes."

"Was he nice—I mean to look at?"

"Just—ordinary."

"Old?"

"No—young."

"What I can't understand is his failure to turn up and be the hero of the hour."

"You would if you knew him. He was not at all that sort of man. But please change the subject."

"Why?"

"I want to forget it."

"All right. Now about this afternoon. I want to take you along with me to a tea-party. Our host is an artist, and his studio is really worth looking at. I confess I can't make head or

tail of some of his pictures, but he has a large circle of admirers, some of whom are even enthusiastic enough to buy his work. His name is Tinsdale, but we all call him 'Willie'. You'll come ? "

" Of course, but I know very little about art."

" All the better."

The tea-party proved to be quite delightful, for Tinsdale was the most cheerful sort of Bohemian, who lived from hand to mouth and yet kept open house. Helen found him charmingly modest, and full of fun. It was the most informal affair, and people dropped in every few minutes, and drank tea out of big mugs, many of which were cracked or chipped.

" So you're the little girl who got lost in the woods ? " said Tinsdale.

" I am."

" Wasn't it good to get away from this motley crowd of *poseurs* and hypocrites for a while ? "

" You don't mean that."

" I do. I've often felt I'd like to run away into the mountains, but I haven't the moral courage. There would be no one to pat me on the back and tell me my pictures were works of art. I don't think I could live without that."

" That remark proves that you could," she replied.

" One day I may try it—go thoroughly native, and live on berries and other things that grow on bushes. like—— Who was it ? "

" Thoreau."

" Yes. My greatest fear is that I may develop into a cynic. Town-life breeds that sort of thing when one is sensitive. You don't want to buy a picture ? "

" No."

" Splendid ! I dreaded you might."

" So there are real grounds for your recently confessed fear ? "

" No—I'm serious. Half the people who buy pictures haven't the faintest notion of what they are buying. They like to be associated with high art. Take Angela Masters—that tall girl who has just come in. She's rich and patronises all the arts——"

Helen scarcely heard what he was saying, for her glance had gone to the girl in question. The name rang in her ears, and she remembered where and in what circumstances she had first heard it. This graceful but rather hard-faced woman was the daughter of David Masters, the man whose power and position Ackroyd was out to destroy. Tinsdale could not fail to notice her interest.

" You know Angela ? " he asked.

" Oh, no. I once heard her name mentioned, that is all."

" Her father is one of the biggest men in town—a wizard in finance. Everything he touches turns to gold."

" She seems rather—sad."

" An old love-affair, I believe, but it was before I came here. I am afraid I shall have to tear myself away. There is a lady interested in Cupid and Psyche. I should love to sell her that.

It would provide her with a few thrills, and me with things more mundane."

He went off, and Helen found herself under the penetrating eyes of Angela Masters. Then the woman came straight across to her, and smiled somewhat artificially.

"Aren't you Miss Mandison?" she asked.

"Yes."

"We don't wait for introductions here, you know. My name is Masters—Angela Masters. A friend pointed you out to me. Aren't you the girl who was missing for a long time?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't help being interested, because in one account I read the name of the man who befriended you was mentioned—a Mr. Garth Ackroyd. I once knew a man of that name."

"How strange!"

"I wonder if it could possibly be the same man?"

Helen hesitated for a moment, and then decided to be frank.

"It was," she said. "He once referred to you."

Angela's perturbation could not be concealed. The heaving breasts, the nervous movements of her hands and throat were eloquent of her emotion.

"Did he tell you what happened?" she asked.

"I think I know."

"I wasn't to blame," she blurted out. "My father is the most masterful man. He was violently opposed to our engagement. All

through my life I have had to bow to his will. But tell me about Garth. Is he well, and what is he doing ? ”

“ He was well enough when I saw him last.”

“ Where is he now ? ”

“ I don’t know. He left me suddenly, and my brother took me home by airplane.”

“ I want to find him.”

“ Why ? ”

“ To explain certain things.”

“ I am afraid I can’t help you.”

“ You mean you won’t.”

“ I don’t understand you.”

“ You do. You can’t deceive me. I can read the truth in your eyes. You think I deserted Garth when he needed me. But I didn’t know until long afterwards that my father had been the cause of his chequered career. I want to make a clean breast of things. I want to tell him that what I feared to do then I am prepared to do now. For years I have lived in hell. He was the only man I ever cared two pins about—or ever shall.”

“ If I could help you I would,” replied Helen.

“ But what I said was quite true. I have not seen him since he left me suddenly far up in the mountains.”

“ But you have heard from him.”

“ Just a card—post marked from this city.”

Angela gasped at this remark.

“ Here in Montreal ? So close and yet—
What is he doing here ? ”

Helen winced at this question. No reply was

possible. What Ackroyd had told her was in the nature of a purely confidential remark. To break that confidence would not help matters in the least, and might accentuate the obvious friction that existed between Angela and her father.

"I should advise you to forget him," she said finally.

"I wish I could——"

"Believe me, it is better that you should."

"Why do you say that?"

"Please don't compel me to say things that may sound unkind."

"But I want to know."

"What exactly?"

"In what terms he referred to me. You said he mentioned me?"

"Yes—twice: once when he was ill, and once when he was well and conscious of what he was saying."

"Then tell me what he said."

"I think he meant to imply that the past was dead."

Angela looked straight ahead of her, as if she saw the spectre of the man she loved somewhere between herself and the wall.

"It was just a case of misunderstanding," she murmured.

"On your part?"

"Yes. I didn't know then how much he meant to me. It has taken years for me to find that out. Why are you so secretive! Is it possible that you too——?"

"What ! "

"I'm sorry. But it wouldn't have been extraordinary—in the circumstances. Garth had a magnetic personality, and he was so clever too. All his fellow-students said the same thing—that Garth would be a great surgeon one day. He was good at all things—so full of life: dynamic is the word. There was nothing he loved better than to get into some old clothes and hike off to the woods. I wonder if you realise how lucky you have been ? "

"Lucky ? "

"To have been with Garth all winter. He can be the most amusing man——"

"I didn't find him very amusing."

"And he never even made love to you ? "

Helen choked down her resentment, for it was obvious that rudeness was not intended.

"He never did," she replied. "He was far too busily engaged in other things."

"What other things ? "

"Securing the wherewithal to live."

"Of course. I never thought of that. But why did he go up there, and bury himself away from the world ? He was capable of achieving anything to which he set his hand."

"The death of his father hit him hard. He had a very strong affection for him."

"I know he had."

"What was he like—the father ? " asked Helen, unable to repress the question.

"Terribly rough—I mean in speech. Garth once told me that his father had been everything

from a cowpuncher to a ship's steward. He married a girl who died three months after Garth was born, and went off again adventuring—to get money, I suppose, for his son's maintenance. He was proud of Garth—so proud that he thought no woman good enough for him. When he knew that Garth and I were on—on intimate terms he began to raise a storm. But Garth said he knew how to manage the old man. Presumably he did, for the next time I saw his father he was different."

"He had no further objections?"

"No."

"But your own father?"

"He was furious——"

At that moment a powerfully built man entered the studio. He was a dominating personality, with an enormous jaw and short, crisp, iron-grey hair. There was nothing of the artist in his make-up, and he struck a note of disharmony in that company. Apparently he was well known to every one present, for he was greeted with patronising smiles.

"My father," whispered Angela. "I should like you to meet him, but please don't mention Garth. He seldom reads the news, and is not likely to associate you with him."

"I won't," promised Helen.

A few moments later Masters strolled across to his daughter. Helen found herself deeply interested in this man who had had such an influence upon her life. Outwardly he seemed charming, but behind the artificial smile which

he managed to conjure up she sensed the cold steel of a ruthless heart. In some strange way he repelled her.

"My father," said Angela. "Father, this is Helen Mandison."

Masters unbent his cast-iron frame.

"Charmed," he said. "You patronise the arts, Miss Mandison?"

"I am afraid not," she confessed. "My knowledge of pictures is practically nil. I invariably praise the wrong thing."

"Then we have something in common," he replied. "Angela has an artistic strain in her, inherited from heaven knows whom. I admit my complete and benighted ignorance. It all seems like a great waste of time."

"Perhaps the fault lies with us," protested Helen, "for not really trying to understand what the artist is trying to say."

"Perhaps," replied Masters absent-mindedly. "Mandison—Mandison! I can't think why the name seems so familiar. Helen too."

Angela looked a trifle nervous, and interpolated a casual remark, but Masters was not the kind of man to leave any problem unsolved. He stroked his aggressive chin for a moment or two, and then his hard eyes lighted up.

"Why, of course, it was in connexion with an airplane crash—and a man named——. You aren't that Miss Mandison?"

"Yes," replied Helen, perforce.

"Curious! Damned curious!" he muttered.

"Why?" asked Helen boldly.

"I once knew Garth Ackroyd. His father made a hash of things, and the boy went to the dogs."

"Father!" gasped Angela.

"Impudent young devil he was too," he continued, regardless of his daughter's embarrassment. "A certain amount of cheek is conducive to success in life, but it must be backed by endeavour and ability. That young——"

"Please," begged Angela. "You misunderstood him, father."

"Rubbish! I know impertinence when I see it and hear it. What is he now, after all the money his short-sighted father wasted on his education? A down-and-out prospector, living in a miserable shack in the mountains."

"I don't think I should call him that," put in Helen.

"Facts have a way of speaking for themselves. Only cowards run away from life. The courageous man faces up to it, and beats it."

She felt she could have laughed at his unctuous pomposity, but it seemed more dignified to hold her tongue. In those few short minutes he had become transparent to her, and she was presented with a living example of the failure of success.

"I wanted to see you, Angela, on a matter of some importance," he said. "And I was told you were here. I hope it is convenient for you to return with me at once?"

"Yes, father," she replied in an almost inaudible voice. "Good-bye, Miss Mandison."

Masters bowed, and then made his way through the crowd, with Angela hooked on his arm. Ruth now joined Helen.

"What do you think of the great David Masters?" she asked. "Men have been known to drop dead at the sight of him."

"He didn't affect me that way."

"Shame! You ought to pay due respect to the strongest man in Canada."

"Are there people who really believe that?"

"Thousands."

"Then I give up all hope of the world arriving at any proper sense of values. I thought he was terribly weak, under the rhinoceros skin which he has crept into. Poor Angela!"

"Oh, her!" scoffed Ruth. "She can get anything she likes out of him if she plays up to him."

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XXVII

IT was destined not to be Helen's one and only meeting with Angela. The girl seemed deliberately to seek her out, and nothing short of absolute rudeness would have had any effect. But, illogically enough, Helen found herself sympathising with Ackroyd's old "flame." This was to some extent due to the fact that Masters was constantly browbeating her. So long as she was a nice, dutiful daughter, complying with his every wish, he lavished expensive

presents on her and metaphorically stroked her hair, but at any sign of rebellion he was the devil personified.

"He really can't help these brain-storms," said Angela. "It has always been like it. Perhaps that is the secret of his success. People are afraid of him."

"And are you afraid?"

"No—not now. Years ago I used to be, and would have sacrificed everything rather than offend him. But when I realised how much I had sacrificed all my fear went."

Helen knew she was referring to her old love-affair, and was not anxious to let the conversation run along that channel. But always Angela came back to it.

"Did Garth ever mention my father?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Not very kindly, I suppose?"

"Well, no."

"If I could undo all that," she said. "At the time I didn't understand what had happened. Poor Garth's father took his own life. Did you know that?"

"Yes."

"My father never dreamed of that happening. I know he used pressure in the settlement of a debt, but who would have guessed that so dreadful a thing would follow. When I heard the awful news I wrote to Garth, but he did not reply."

"You wrote to him?" gasped Helen.

"Of course. I wanted to let him know that it wasn't his poverty which was the obstacle, but my father's wishes."

"He never got that letter."

"How do you know?"

"He told me so."

"Then the servant to whom I gave it—— Thank you for telling me that. It makes a great difference."

"You love him still?"

"Yes. I'd go to him wherever he was—if he needed me. But perhaps he has ceased to need me."

Helen made no response to this, and she soon raised an excuse to get away, for the state of affairs was becoming more and more embarrassing. She had intended to stay with the Athertons but a week, but they would not hear of her going so soon, and Ruth had secretly telephoned Mandison telling him that Helen was enjoying herself immensely and that he must not expect her back yet a while.

"It's all arranged," she said. "We're to keep you here by force if need be. My dear, you are a tremendous success here."

"Success! I feel like a poor little country mouse."

"Rot! But you need more clothes. You don't do yourself justice. I'll take you along to Adele, who is the——"

"Oh, no, you won't. My future doesn't lie in this direction. I shall probably marry a cow-puncher, and lay my old bones in a prairie grave."

Ruth laughed and opened a box that had just arrived from a costumier. It contained yet another expensive creation, and nothing would satisfy her but to try it on there and then.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"I'm a poor judge. But does it really give you a thrill?"

"You bet it does. You know, Helen, sometimes I think you are not human."

"I assure you I am."

"No, you haven't changed a bit. At school we used to call you 'Helen, the hard-boiled.' It's time you grew up."

"You mean become less hard-boiled?"

"Exactly."

"What does that involve?"

"Making the most of the gifts which Nature gave you. Exerting the power of your sex over the poor fools who become hypnotised by it. In short, getting the biggest kick possible out of life."

"I've had the biggest kick I am likely to get for a long time—quite recently."

"You mean that adventure of yours?"

"Yes."

She gave Helen a side-glance.

"Was there another side to it?"

"Yes, but not quite what you imagine."

"Well, you do credit me with an evil mind. I can quite imagine your cave-man sat whole evenings and looked at you with calf-like eye while you mended his socks. Now had it been me—— What opportunities you do miss, Helen."

"God sends the opportunities and fools miss them ; but which was the bigger fool I find it difficult to decide."

Ruth slipped off her dress, and stood regarding her guest with narrow eyes.

"You're keeping something from me, young woman," she said.

"Perhaps——"

The telephone-bell rang, and Ruth picked up the receiver. She listened for a second or two and then handed it to Helen.

"Angela Masters wants you."

Helen heard Angela's husky voice on the line. It was an invitation to tea that afternoon, and, being taken completely by surprise, she could not think of a decent excuse that was not a deliberate lie.

"I'm not sure that I can manage it," she stammered.

"Do—please. I'm worried about something. You are the only person who can help me. All the others are such fools. I need your advice. Please don't fail me."

"All right. I'll manage."

"Thank you. You're a dear. Come as soon as you like after three o'clock."

"I told you you were a great success," said Ruth. "Very few people are invited to the Masters' *ménage*. It is supposed to be a signal honour. But I had no idea Angela was on such familiar terms."

"She's a strange woman."

"Very strange. They say there was a man

in her life. I've never heard his name mentioned, but old Masters put his hoof on that affair in a very decisive way. Result—Angela has ever since brooded over her lost love. Silly fool ! ”

“ Don't be too hard on her, Ruth.”

“ Can't help it. There she is with all Master's millions to play about with, and any one of half a dozen very excellent men to amuse her, without inflicting marriage on her, and all she does is to wail over some worthless Romeo like a stupid girl of seventeen.”

“ You've never been in love, Ruth ? ”

“ I was inoculated against it by the first man who tried to get fresh with me. So you're going to tea ? ”

“ It looks as if I must.”

“ Well, good luck ! ”

Masters lived some five miles out of town, in a house built to his own design some ten years before. Its appearance was like Masters himself—immensely solid, and a trifle sombre. Everything was wrong artistically—from the squat towers at all corners to the imitation battlements. It was set in a ten-acre park of conifers, and approached by a broad drive, on either side of which were marble statuettes. These had evidently been chosen by Masters himself, for they represented a whole succession of Cæsars—and, incidentally, Napoleon.

Helen gasped as the car rolled her up to the main entrance. The place repelled her in some strange way. She could not imagine anyone being happy there. She was received by a man

in livery—an individual which she had believed no longer existed outside books and musical comedy. This stiff and ridiculous creature escorted her through a vast hall, from either wall of which alleged ancestral portraits frowned at her, along a small hall, and into a much more tolerable room, in which Angela was seated, playing a piano.

“So good of you to come,” she said. “This is my ‘den,’ where I entertain my own few friends. The rest of the house is impossible, because more often than not there is a board meeting on. That’s my little garden out there. I look after it myself—for exercise. At the moment it is rather ragged.”

Helen gazed out of the window, through a vista of delightful old-fashioned flowers. It was a relief after what she had already seen, and it gave her a new insight into the character of Angela.

“Very restful,” she said.

“Yes. I hate the house, with all its pomposity and artificiality. But my father thinks it is wonderful. I’ve never been happy here, and never shall. I’ve an allowance of a thousand dollars a month to do what I like with.”

“That’s a tremendous lot of money.”

“I know, but you can’t buy happiness with money. Do you know why I begged you to come to-day?”

“No.”

“It was to ask your advice.”

“You are a more experienced woman than I.

I live on a ranch, miles from any town. I know very little about——”

“There is no need to be modest. Helen, you’re the only girl I’ve ever met who has taken the slightest interest in me. I’ve no mother—no one to confide in. My father thinks that so long as I have a home and money to spend there are no problems for me. I have got to hate money, to loathe all this dressing up, to hate myself for being an impostor. I’m miserable. I envy every girl I see on the sidewalk who is able to earn her own living and be independent. I want to be like one of them. That idea has always been in my mind, and I have worked here secretly to put it into practice.”

“What do you mean?”

“The piano. Music is my only gift. I think I could teach music.”

“There isn’t much in it these days.”

“I know. But my needs are small. I should love just a small flat, a few pieces of furniture of my own selection, a friend or two to chat with on occasion. What do you think?”

“You mean you are seriously contemplating this?”

“Yes.”

“And your father?”

“He would be furious. He would cut off my allowance in order to compel me to come back.”

“You have taken all that into consideration?”

“Oh, yes. It is necessary not to labour under any delusions. The only point is—am I capable?”

"Won't you play something?"

"You will adjudicate?"

"I am scarcely qualified, but I should like to hear you play."

Angela nodded and went to the small grand piano. She ignored the pile of music beside her, and sat for a few moments reflectively. Then she sighed and started to play. Helen recognised the piece as a Chopin study. The thing became alive under the expert fingers of Angela, but, like a great deal of the Polish master's compositions, it was in a brooding minor key. It seemed to fit her mood, and in a few seconds she was utterly absorbed in her art. Helen listened with bated breath. The garden faded out, and as through a mist she saw the girl, her head drooping over the keyboard. She seemed transfigured—an entirely different creature. Came a plaintive minor passage, like a whimpering woman, and then from somewhere above this room of music a sharp report. The music stopped and Angela swung round on the stool.

"Did you hear anything?" she asked.

"Yes, a loud bang. I thought it came from overhead."

"My father's study is there, but he is not at home to-day. I wonder if——"

She stopped and listened intently, but no other sound was heard. Then, apologising, she started to play again. The second interruption was ocular. The door was suddenly burst open, and the butler came to view. He was gasping

for breath, and his flabby face and brows were bespangled with gleaming beads of perspiration.

"The master!"

Angela stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"The master," he reiterated. "Something dreadful has happened. Oh, please come at once, Miss Angela."

She stood up and steadied herself by clutching the lid of the piano.

"Tell me, William," she begged. "He has not——?"

"Yes. I found him—in his chair. I have telephoned the doctor, but it's too late. He was—dead——"

"Dead!"

She swayed, and Helen went to her and caught her arm.

"Courage, Angela!"

"I'm all right—now. But I don't understand. I must go to—to him. Will—will you come too? I'm terribly afraid."

Helen inclined her head, and they went out together, followed by the butler, who was wringing his hands and giving facial expression to his alarm and horror.

THE body of David Masters was found reclining in his big arm-chair, beside the massive mahogany table where he used to work.

The eyes were closed and the face impassive. Close beside him was a decanter of whisky and a half-empty glass. On the chair, within a few inches of his right hand, was a heavy pistol. Helen gave an involuntary shudder as her gaze took in the grim sight. The fatal wound was not visible, for he was inclining towards the left side of the chair ; but as she looked a thin trail of blood overran the leather upholstery and began to drip on to the valuable Persian carpet.

Angela gave a kind of choke and moved forward, but Helen restrained her by catching her hand. The butler, alive to his duty, swiftly removed the Persian carpet. There came the noise of a car outside, and then a ring. A few seconds later Masters' doctor was shown in. His examination was brief.

"Instantaneous," he muttered. "It will be necessary to call in the police. William, see to that at once. Miss Masters, I think it would be advisable for you to rest. This is a terrible situation—terrible !"

Helen led the dumbfounded woman back to her own sitting-room. There she recovered from the first paralysing shock.

"Suicide !" she murmured. "But why—why ? He had everything a man could want—wealth, power. No—no, it wasn't suicide. It couldn't be. He never had a pistol. Some one must have got in and shot——"

"Angela !"

"But he wasn't that sort of man. He was always in the best of health—full of energy and

enthusiasm. He wouldn't do a thing like that. He couldn't."

"Hadn't you better go to your room and rest before the police come? They are bound to ask many questions."

"Yes, yes."

"I'll come with you."

"Thank you."

Helen escorted her to her bedroom on the first floor. She was about to leave her, when she saw an envelope on the bed with the name "Angela" scrawled on the outside.

"For you," she said.

"My father's writing."

"I'll go now."

"No—wait. I must read this. Don't go—yet!"

The envelope was unsealed and contained but a half-sheet of notepaper, on which was some writing. Angela read it, and then handed it to Helen:

"DEAR ANGELA,

"This is the end. Some one has stabbed me in the back. I can't face the shame and ignominy. Forgive me if you can.

"FATHER."

Helen did not hear the convulsive sobbing of her companion. Her whole mind was elsewhere. She was recalling Ackroyd and his grim resolution. With a thoroughness in keeping with his character he had achieved his set purpose. Her

mouth grew tight and her heart hard and cold as she reflected upon the enormity of his act. He had not even stopped to consider the feelings of the woman who had once loved him, but had struck to death in one swift and well-directed stroke. The strong man had gone down under it. Was ever revenge more fitting? Even Ackroyd could scarcely have bargained on this finale. Masters had met the same fate as his early victim. Yes, it was a triumph for the man who had waited all those years to bring it about. He had every reason to congratulate himself.

But to her it was the end of illusion. The hope that she had nurtured during the past week or two was shattered. Nothing remained but ashes in her mouth and a very deep sympathy in her heart for the living victim of this tragedy. The police came before she could get away, and insisted upon her staying until they could get a statement from her.

When at last she was permitted to leave, her head was swimming. The Athertons heard the news with bated breath, and during the relation of her experience the newsboys commenced shouting the news—a tribute to the energy of the Press when a great scandal is involved.

“Awful!” said Ruth. “But why did he do it? What was the shame he dare not face?”

“I don’t know, and I’m sure Angela doesn’t.”

“To think of her with all those millions——”

Helen winced at this, and Ruth bit her tongue. It was much later in the evening when Atherton returned with additional news.

"This is going to be the most ghastly show-up," he said. "I hear that amazing allegations have been made against Masters. The information, accompanied by what is purported to be definite proof, was sent to the chief of police. Masters was invited to go down there yesterday afternoon."

"Then it was true," said Ruth. "Otherwise he wouldn't have come home and——"

"I am afraid a lot of very unpleasant facts are going to leak out. For example, it is said that Masters was never married."

"What!" gasped Ruth.

"Angela is not his daughter, but the child of a man who was convicted for forgery long ago, and Masters himself served a term of imprisonment under another name."

"But Angela—she doesn't know?" said Helen.

"Apparently not."

"What a terrible revelation! Can't she be kept in ignorance of all this?"

"No. The truth must come out. It is impossible to conceal anything in a case like this, where the person involved is a man of great wealth and position."

Some friends dropped in later, and Helen was compelled to listen to many versions of the affair. There was mild speculation as to which one of Masters' many enemies had brought him down, but none of them apparently remembered the Ackroyd tragedy. Helen escaped from it all at last and went to bed with her brain buzzing.

Morning only increased the excitement, for the Press gave its chief positions to the latest drama. There were photographs of the house, the room where the tragedy had taken place—marked with a cross at the exact spot—the chair, and also Angela. Nothing appeared to have been suppressed. Already it was stated that Masters had built up his vast fortune on a fraudulent transaction, that his early life under another name would scarcely bear looking into. Even the parentage of Angela was hinted at, and it was this which caused Helen to fling aside the newspapers in disgust.

“Why can’t they have a little compassion?” she said. “Think of Angela’s feelings, when she reads these rags. Ruth, will you come and see her with me?”

“Of course,” replied Ruth. “If you think it will do any good.”

“Put yourself in her place. Wouldn’t you like to feel that some of your friends were still friends?”

“But I never got on with her very well.”

“Forget that now.”

They took the car immediately after breakfast, but on arriving at the big house were told that Angela had gone out for a walk. Half an hour was spent in waiting, and then they left a message to the effect that they would call again in the afternoon.

Angela never returned from her walk. Two days later her body was found in a flooded quarry. It left the Press free to say what they

liked without offending a living soul, and they said it with all the vitriolic outpourings of which they were capable. The great David Masters was now but a synonym for cunning and cupidity.

"*Sic transit*," quoth Atherton.

Helen kept her secret well. It lay there in her heart like a cankerous thing. Here was vengeance manifested in all its stark cruelty and madness. She wanted to get away from the scene of its fulfilment into the cleaner air of the prairie.

"I am leaving in the morning, Ruth," she said. "It was very good of you to have me for so long."

"Nonsense! We shall always be delighted to have you whenever you grow tired of the simple life."

"It is the kind of life that suits me. Won't you give me an opportunity to return your hospitality?"

"Thanks! I should love it. May I write you later?"

"Yes—do."

It was but the polite rejoinder. She knew from Ruth's expression that nothing would bore her more than a week or two on the prairie. Twenty-four hours later she was on the train being whirled westward. It seemed very much like destiny that she should be present at the scene which was to ring down the curtain on the Ackroyd-Masters vendetta. Beside this brutal drama she placed her experiences in the

mountains, and by contrast those memorable days grew more and more pleasant to reflect upon. If it could only have ended that way—without the grim sequel—the future would have been easier, but blood was splashed across her pages of romance.

The journey seemed interminable, for she could not sleep, and as a result she reached her destination looking, and feeling, dead tired. Alan was there with the car, and expressed surprise at her heavy eyes and rather pallid cheeks.

“ So much for the bright lights when they send you home looking like death,” he said. “ What you need is prairie air, and then some—what was it ?—cocktails ? ”

“ No, life at too high a pressure,” she replied. “ Oh, but I’m glad to be back again. Don’t drive too fast, Alan. I want to look at things.”

“ Sentimentalist ! ”

“ Yes, thank God ! ”

“ You sound almost tragic.”

“ I had a bad experience, Alan. I was present when David Masters shot himself. Not in the same room, but in the house. I met his daughter and was taking tea with her.”

“ Great Scot ! ”

“ And then she too took her own life. It is all like a nightmare. Don’t ask me any details, please. I want to forget it—to pretend that it never really happened. If you only knew how horrible these things are when you are close to them——”

"I do know."

"Ah! the War. But that was different. Death was a clean thing then."

"You are welcome to that delusion, Helen," he said gravely. "But have done with it. Look at the wheat. What do you think of it? Father thinks it ought to be a record crop, but it's never wise to make prophecies of that nature so early in the season. You'll be interested to know that I have beaten your old altitude record in the plane by over five hundred feet."

"Is that absolutely honest-to-goodness?"

"Sure!"

"Then I must try again."

On the morrow she awoke to the familiar life, and it seemed more than ever desirable after her recent experience. Her personal battering by Fate was not such as could be cured easily, but the things she mostly craved were at hand. Alan had evidently spoken to his father about the Masters' tragedy for Mandison never referred to it.

"It's fine to have you back, Helen," he said. "The cooking's not been the same since you went away."

"Arabella studies your digestion," she replied, "while I foolishly indulge your bad tastes."

So the days passed with discussions on cattle, the wheat crop, the farming crisis, and what not. Came the blazing summer, and the change in the colour of the landscape from vivid green to rippling gold. It was this change she loved to witness, although it was the prelude to the rush

and turmoil of harvest-time and the fall of the year. Twice she had tried to beat Alan's airplane record, and failed by a great deal, owing chiefly to wrong climatic conditions.

"Third time lucky," she said. "I will not permit you to retain that swelled head for ever."

"Pugnacious little devil!" said Alan. "You ought to have been a man, Helen."

It reminded her of a remark once made by Ackroyd, to the effect that he had made a man of her. With that curiously vivid reminder came mental pictures of the spot where she had spent the preceding winter. The smallest detail was recalled, but all in a setting of frost and snow. She had left it while the snow lay deep in the valleys and the river was choked with floe. How different it must be now under the summer sun! The prospect was all the more alluring in the fierce and unrelenting prairie heat. Yes, it would be good to go there again, and revive what pleasant memories were associated with that strange adventure. That evening she made a casual remark to Alan.

"I'm going to steal the plane to-morrow morning early and go for a flip."

"Third time lucky, eh?"

"Perhaps."

SHORTLY after daybreak she arose, took a plunge in the river, and then donned the old flying-suit. Two of the "boys" wheeled the plane out of the hangar and filled the tank to the brim with gasolene. As she took her seat she was hailed from the house, and saw Alan standing on the balcony in his pyjamas.

"Good luck!" he yelled. "But take care!"

She waved her hand and set the plane taxiing across the flat, dusty range. Taking off was difficult because the prevailing wind came across the sea of golden wheat. But at last she got away, and missed two trees by no more than a yard or two. Not yet had she exhausted the thrill of the take-off—that vision of earth falling away, and the incomparable ebullition of spirit which it always induced in her.

Now she was over the wheat—their wheat—whose burnished copper surface went wedge-shaped across five thousand acres of land. It diminished as she made altitude, until, looking back, she saw how relatively insignificant it was. Soon it was lost to view completely. Came more scattered farms, and more wheat, then habitations and all signs of man's enterprise faded out.

She was tempted to follow the course she had taken on her abortive mission to the diseaseridden camp, but that would only bring her ultimately to a dead end—the spot where she had crashed and lost consciousness. The better and

safer route was via La Chappelle—the little township where Ackroyd had said his good-bye. This she would have little difficulty in locating, since the railroad ran within a few miles of it. From there it merely meant following the river all the way to her destination.

The sturdy engine beat a steady note as she winged her way through space. Below her the land was shimmering in the heat, and visibility was not what it might have been, but there was a complete absence of cloud and a promise of settled weather everywhere. Soon she struck the railway, whose snaky track wandered through the hills. It led her at long last to the river, and she saw below her La Chappelle. On the right bank was the Preston Farm, memorable for many reasons.

She came down until she was within a few hundred feet of the tree-tops, then circled the house twice, and had the satisfaction of seeing Ned Preston and his father emerge from a shed to gaze up at the aviator.

"Ned!" she yelled, and came down even closer.

She saw his tense face turned upwards, and waved her arms frantically. Finally she was recognised. That was obvious from Ned's excited gesticulations. Once more she circled the house, and then made up the river. She remembered every twist and turn of it, and incidents and conversations associated with it. Now she was above the rapids, where Ackroyd had bumped the canoe so badly. She re-lived those

minutes of dreadful suspense, and breathed a sigh of relief as she entered the wider and more placid reaches of the river.

Again she was out in the blue, with nothing but woods and rivulets and ravines beneath her. The cool, sweet air beat into her face, and occasionally she got glimpses of animal life. Then came human beings in the shape of two canoes filled with Indians. They stopped paddling and gazed up at the unusual sight. A few seconds and they too were gone.

Failure of the engine in this region would have spelt irreparable disaster, for the country was upheaved and thickly timbered. But such a possibility never entered her mind. Her whole attention was occupied in recognising particular spots—places where she and Ackroyd had camped, dangerous spots in the river where projecting rocks had had to be circumvented.

She was aware that she was approaching the last stage of her flight. Another twenty or thirty miles and the shack would come to view. It was her intention to circle it, pay homage to memories it had implanted in her soul, and then to return.

Time could have been saved by cutting across the serpentine bends of the river, but she preferred to follow its course, so to feed her excitement. Familiar objects were brought up, one after another, and finally she entered the straight stretch at the end of which was the shack. Here she made altitude, and gazed down on the spot which had once served as a shelter. It looked

diminutive from the air, and would have been missed altogether by any one who was not already aware of its existence.

She made a wide circle round it, and came back again and again to indulge her emotions. Away to her left was a long and narrow clearing in the timber. It was sunlit and inviting, but she remembered that it was not by any means as flat and smooth as it appeared to be from the air. Given certain conditions it was a possible landing-place for a plane, but she was not sure whether those conditions obtained at the moment.

Notwithstanding, she came down and examined it at a much lower altitude. Being so near earth the desire to visit the hut was now an obsession. She believed the wind was right for taking-off again, and the space sufficient. Landing was not so difficult. A few moments of reflection and she decided to take the risk.

Missing the tops of pine-trees by a few feet she "pancaked" on the comparatively level but bumpy ground. The machine behaved magnificently, and finally came to a halt many yards from the extreme end of the clearing. Her heart bounded as she switched off the engine and climbed out.

Never had she experienced such exhilaration. It was amusing to remember that she had been a prisoner there for months, and was now able to make but a short excursion of it. She made her way across the deep pine needles and into the thick timber. There her memory served her well, and she found the narrow, rocky path that

led to the hut. All around her were flowers, buzzing insects and butterflies. The odour of the pines was strong on the air and good to breathe. From close at hand came the regular beat of the river—that sound which she had come to love so much.

As she drew nearer the hut strange emotions swept her. Deliberately she was reviving memories that were perhaps better forgotten. What madness it was !

She emerged from the trees and saw the hut, clinging to the bank of the river. Opposite, the trees were clearly reflected in the still water near the bank—just as they had been before. Nothing was changed. The curtains which she had made for the windows were still there, and on one of the timbers were her initials, carved during a few minutes of leisure with Ackroyd's jack-knife. She passed round the end of the place, and found the door closed but not locked. This surprised her, for she remembered Ackroyd having locked the door before they left the place. Nervously she pushed the door slightly open and gazed inside.

The place was empty, and it was neat and clean, just as she had left it. Catching her breath she stole inside. The first thing that caught her gaze was a coat hanging on the door. It was Ackroyd's coat—the one he had worn when they left the place—and on the mantel-shelf was a pipe and a tin of tobacco. She gasped at the significance of this, for it meant that he had come back again !

To stay longer was impossible. She did not wish to see him after what had happened. Such a meeting could have no other result than the exacerbation of her resentment and antagonism. So much for foolish sentiment !

A scrap of paper was lying near the stove. It had evidently been used as a spill to light his pipe, and it had the appearance of a twisted-up letter. On the unburned end was a signature in green ink. She saw the letters HART. There came an almost irrepressible impulse to read what it contained, but she overcame it and turned away determinedly.

At the door she hesitated and looked back. It was impossible to restrain a smile at the appearance of the place. It looked as if in one respect he had changed. This neatness and cleanliness was quite unexpected. Even the stove had recently been blackleaded, and, marvel of marvels, there was a clock ticking away what appeared to be the correct time.

But her mouth grew hard as she remembered Angela. It would take more than the acquirement of a few civilised traits to wipe out that business. She wished now she had never entertained this crazy idea, for it was stirring up the muddy past and dragging into the open a ghastly skeleton. With a sigh she closed the door.

“ Hey ! ”

She gave a great start at the unexpected call, and swiftly turned her head. Coming down the path that led to the creek where Ackroyd had searched for gold was the man himself, carrying

a shovel, wash-pan, and a number of smaller things. Her first impulse was to run towards the plane, but she hesitated, because this would look like an act of cowardice on her part. There was only one thing to do—face out the situation.

He came towards her, with his sun-tanned face puckered up into a curious smile. She stood quite still while he was ridding himself of his burden.

“Helen!” he muttered, “by all the gods!”

“I didn’t know you were here,” she replied crisply.

“Was that your machine which shattered the peace of the mountains?”

“Yes.”

“Well, well. Who would have dreamed of it? But what happened—did you fall out of it?”

“No, I made a perfectly good landing.”

“That’s fine. But don’t stand there. Come inside.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I came to see the hut—that is all.”

“Well, have a look at it, and I’ll obliterate myself.”

“I have already seen it. Now I must go.”

“You refuse my hospitality?”

“I am in a hurry.”

“I see. Well, where is the machine?”

“In the clearing—about a quarter of a mile away.”

“Guess I’ll come and see you safely off.”

“You needn’t bother.”

"No bother. Unlike you, I'm not in any great hurry. The days are long enough, God knows."

She was breathing heavily, but striving to appear quite calm and dignified. To see him again, to hear his voice, was a trial she had scarcely expected. But she felt that any small thing would break her resistance. It was not safe here, with him—even in face of what had happened.

"Come on," he begged. "I'm keen to have a look at the machine."

She moved away, and he walked beside her. All the while he was looking elsewhere, but she knew that not one movement of hers escaped those keen eyes of his.

"Better luck to-day," he said. "I struck quite a good patch of gravel. I apologise for the things I have said about that length of creek."

She made no reply, and he went on :

"If your luck's out it's out, and if it's in it's in. A bit risky, wasn't it—making a landing in this place ? "

"A little," she admitted.

"Well, you always had plenty of grit. I will say that about you."

"Thank you," she replied coldly.

"I mean it."

"I don't doubt it. You invariably say what you mean."

"There are worse faults. By the way, did that old wound of yours heal up all right ? "

"Oh, yes—quite."

"I heard that Billing and his confederate got dealt with pretty harshly. All kinds of charges were made against them. A real tough crowd that. The body of the third man was found down-river."

She nodded her head rather than speak. It was so obvious he was trying to inveigle her into an argument, and she was afraid to trust herself. Very soon the plane was seen, dazzling white in the bright sunshine.

"So that's your bird of passage?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't seem to fit in here."

"I will swiftly remove the eyesore. I was a fool ever to have landed."

"Yes, you might have had a bad spill."

"I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean then?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"Well, you should know. I guess you got my post card?"

"I did."

"I went into the blue immediately afterwards, and didn't get a chance to write again. Had a craving to get back here."

This remark surprised her. She stole a glance at his face and saw that it was very serious.

"But surely that isn't quite true?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"You couldn't have left Montreal immediately after you wrote that card."

"I'm telling you I did."

"And you came straight here?"

"Pretty well. I had to see some one at Edmonton. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because——" Her voice trembled. "Garth, did you see Masters when you were in Montreal?"

"Yes."

"Ah!"

"It was in a restaurant. He didn't see me. It was a dinner-party—a special table—and he was the guest of the evening. I felt like standing up and shouting what I knew—— But I had other work to do."

"Other work? You mean you left Montreal?"

"Yes. It held unhappy memories for me. I left him to his triumphs, and came north."

"Garth! What are you saying?"

"Just what happened."

"You mean you did not—take any steps to——"?

"No. I just left him to it. You're a sensible kind of woman, Helen, for all your quarrelsome ways. Like most women, you talk a lot of nonsense, but you were right about that business."

Her brain was swimming. Even now she felt she had not got the thing clear.

"Didn't you write to some one—about Masters?" she gasped.

"Me? Why should I? I just wanted to get away—into the clean air again. Why, what's the matter?"

"Don't you know that Masters is dead?" she asked.

"Dead!"

"He shot himself."

He seized her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes.

"You can't mean—that?"

"Yes. There was a terrible scandal. Some one communicated with the police. They had to take action, and Masters went to see them. He came home and—and took his own life."

His eyes lighted up, and then his mouth twitched.

"You mustn't expect me to shed any tears," he said. "But I'm sorry about Angela. She loved him despite his domineering ways. If she had had the courage to break away from him she would have been a charming girl. He deserved everything he got, but it's too bad that she should suffer——"

"She is not suffering."

"What do you mean?"

"She couldn't face the scandal—the disgrace. She took the only means she could think of to avoid it."

"What! You can't mean——?"

"Yes. She drowned herself."

He turned from her and stood staring through the trees. She saw his big hands close and unclose, and knew that this was no masquerade.

"You didn't know?" she asked.

"No."

"I thought it was——"

"You thought it was me?" he cut in. "Well, it might have been. It was the thing, the ending I had lived for. No, not quite. I had never intended that Angela should suffer like that."

"Where was your imagination?"

"You're right. I was blind—a dead stone. Well, thank God I never stirred a finger to bring it about. Something else happened—long before I got to Montreal. I discovered that the daughter of one of those prospectors whose bodies we found was alive, and fighting to bring up a family. That changed the whole situation."

"How?"

"She needed the money. When I located her she was in hospital waiting to undergo an operation. Her name was Kate Lockhart, and she had three children—two boys and a girl. What she feared was not the operation, but the possibility of the children being left stranded. She needed a stimulant—something that would help her to win through. When she knew that whatever happened her children would be assured of a few joys in life she pulled herself together. The operation was successful."

"You mean you gave her that money?"

"I had to. I had no kind of right to it."

"But if the other man had no relatives surely you could have claimed half?"

"I'm not good at legal matters," he demurred.

"So it was that which prevented you from getting the proof you required——?"

"No."

" But you said——"

" I didn't want to go on with it. My God, must you keep asking me questions ? "

" Only one more."

" Go on then."

" What made you change your mind ? "

" That's the one question I'm not going to answer."

" Coward ! "

" I'm ready to admit that."

" Liar ! "

" And that too."

" Then I'll answer it for you. You changed your mind because you realised at long last that this desire for revenge was a cancerous growth upon your soul, that for years you had wasted your manhood in a quest which, had it been successful, would have plunged you even deeper into the abyss in which you lived. Isn't that the truth ? "

" Partly," he admitted. " Now we'll have the other bit. What beat me was not merely those plain psychic facts—but you. You came into my life without my asking. You brought with you something new to my experience. Before that I had considered myself a pretty self-contained outfit. I had enough knowledge of life to be able to knock out a bare subsistence—even in a place like this where Nature employs all sorts of cunning devices to beat a man. You wrecked all that."

" How ? " she asked artlessly.

" God knows. But all the things I had thought

so big and momentous began to have the appearance of the landscape seen through the wrong end of a telescope. When I saw Masters again in Montreal I realised that. He seemed none the less dirty and dishonest to me, but I experienced a kind of physical repulsion. I wanted to get away from him—to forget him. Hitherto I had done everything possible to nourish my memory, and my hate. Look what you've done for me—turned me into a sickly sentimentalist."

"That's not sentimentalism."

"What is it then?"

"Common sense. How many years of your life have you wasted dreaming about vengeance, when you might have been engaged in contributing something to the good of humanity. It wasn't Masters you were hurting but yourself."

"Yes, you're right," he admitted.

"And now you've come back to the old trade—gold-hunting?"

"Yes, but that's all over now."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got all the gold I want."

"You're modest, aren't you?"

"Not particularly. When I was down east I discovered that it was still possible for me to work for my diploma. I wanted enough money to carry me through that. I'm going back."

"When?"

"To-morrow morning."

"To be a doctor?"

"Of sorts. Maybe a patient or two will prove

daring enough to risk me. Anyway, I'm going to give it a trial."

She gripped his hand and wrung it.

"There speaks a man at last. But you are not going back to-morrow."

"Why not?"

"Because I am going to take you back to-day—now. Come back to the shack, and I'll lend you a hand with what baggage you have. Don't stare at me, you big goof!"

MOUNTAIN GOLD

CHAPTER XXX

THEY were back at the hut, on their last trip, taking the few oddments that remained. Ackroyd sighed as he stared round the room for the last time.

"I could have sold this for a knock-out price," he said. "But I want to keep it in case of emergency."

"What sort of emergency?"

"Failing to get through the examination."

"You won't fail."

"No, I won't. Too much hangs upon it."

She smiled at the grim determination in his expression.

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked.

"Of course I am. Isn't it a pleasant change from frowning?"

"You never frowned."

"I did—every time you reminded me of the

circumstances in which you had exchanged a quite useful mule for me."

"Can't you forget that?"

"I don't want to forget it. I don't want to forget anything that ever happened here."

"That means you weren't really unhappy?"

"Unhappy! Is lack of imagination an inevitable trait in the medical make-up?"

"I don't lack imagination."

"You do."

"Are we going to start quarrelling again?"

"You started it."

"Well," he gasped, "really, Helen, I believe you love quarrelling and fighting."

"I do."

"Good! That brings me right down to the point. There's a big battle soon to commence, behind a brass plate in some yet unknown street. Would you care to take a hand in that?"

"On whose side?"

"Mine. I'm to be the chief aggressor. It's going to be uphill, and will call for courage and patience."

"Patients, you mean." She took his hand, while her eyes swam. "Garth, why did I come back here do you think?"

"To have a look at the hut."

"No, to look for my heart which I had lost somewhere in this neighbourhood."

"And have you found it?"

"You should know—you thief!"

He seized her in his arms, and held her so fast that she gasped for breath. For a moment or

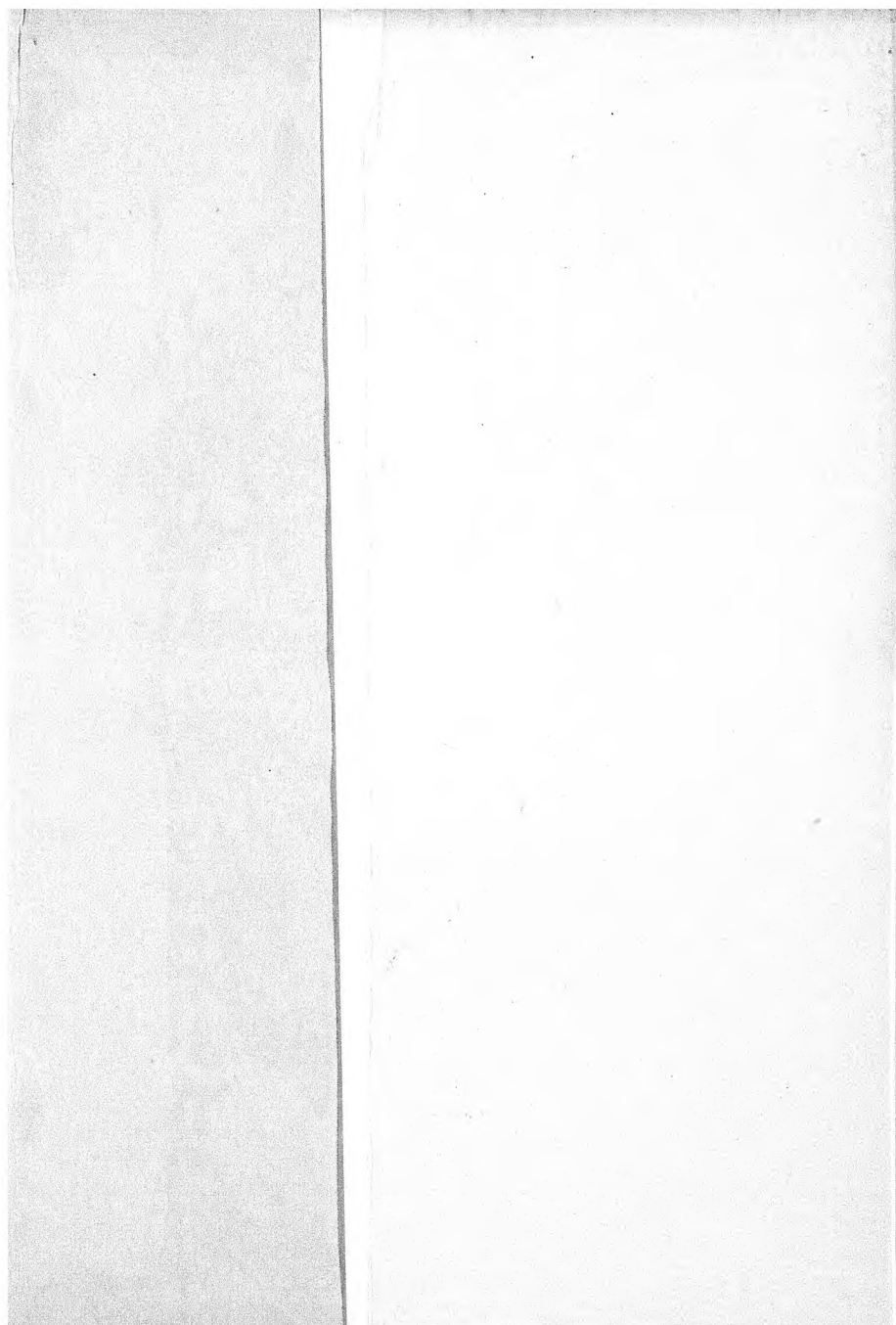
two he rained kisses on her inviting mouth, and then he released her and seized the articles that had fallen at his feet.

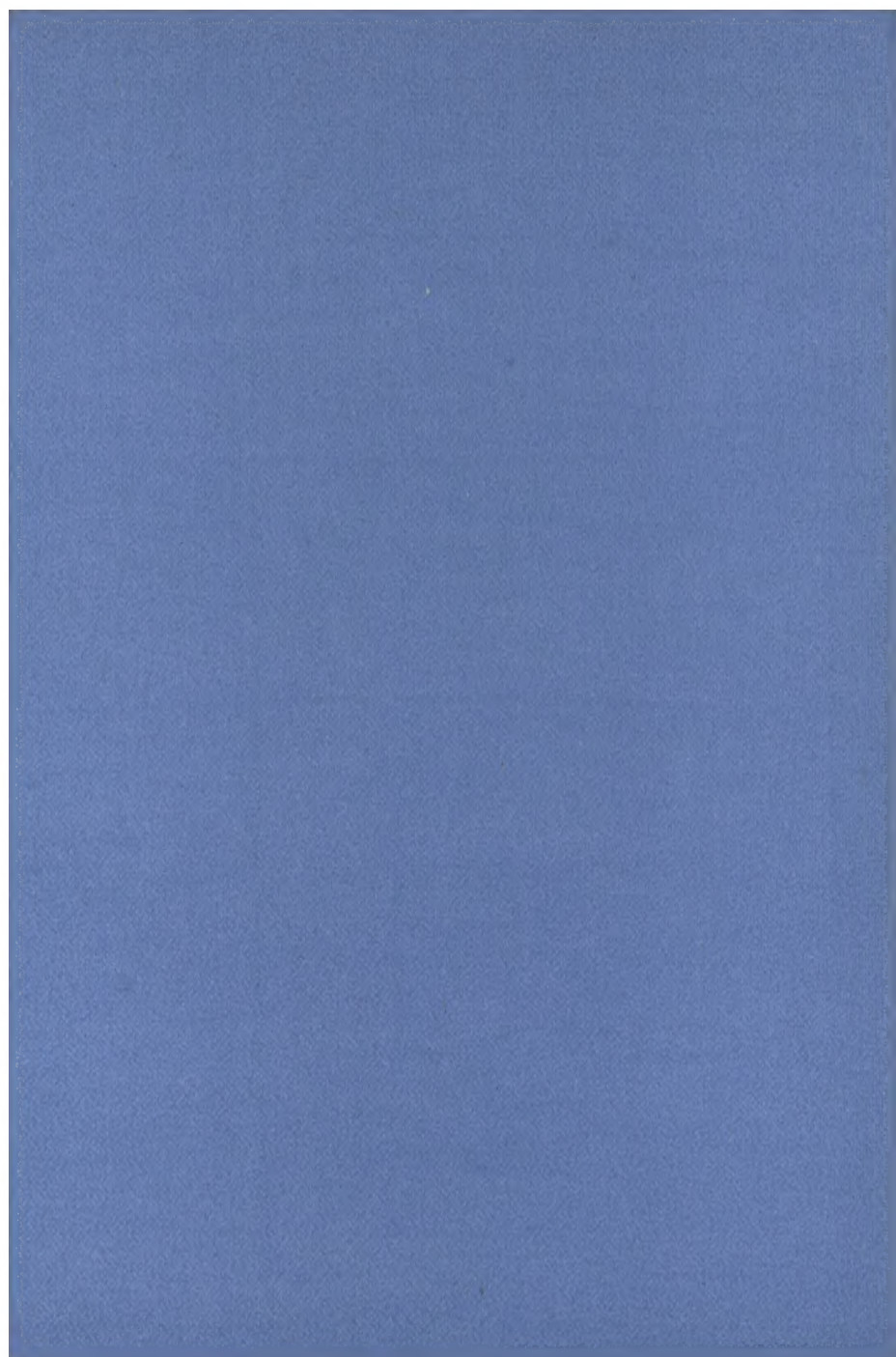
"The plane," he said. "And no loops or tail-spins. I simply couldn't stand them in my present condition. Will you come, or must I carry you?"

"Coming—you monster!"

A quarter of an hour later the plane took off and soared into the blue. From his farm young Ned Preston saw it—moving high above the scattered cirri clouds. He waved his hands wildly, but no one observed him. To the occupants earth was far, far away.

THE END





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